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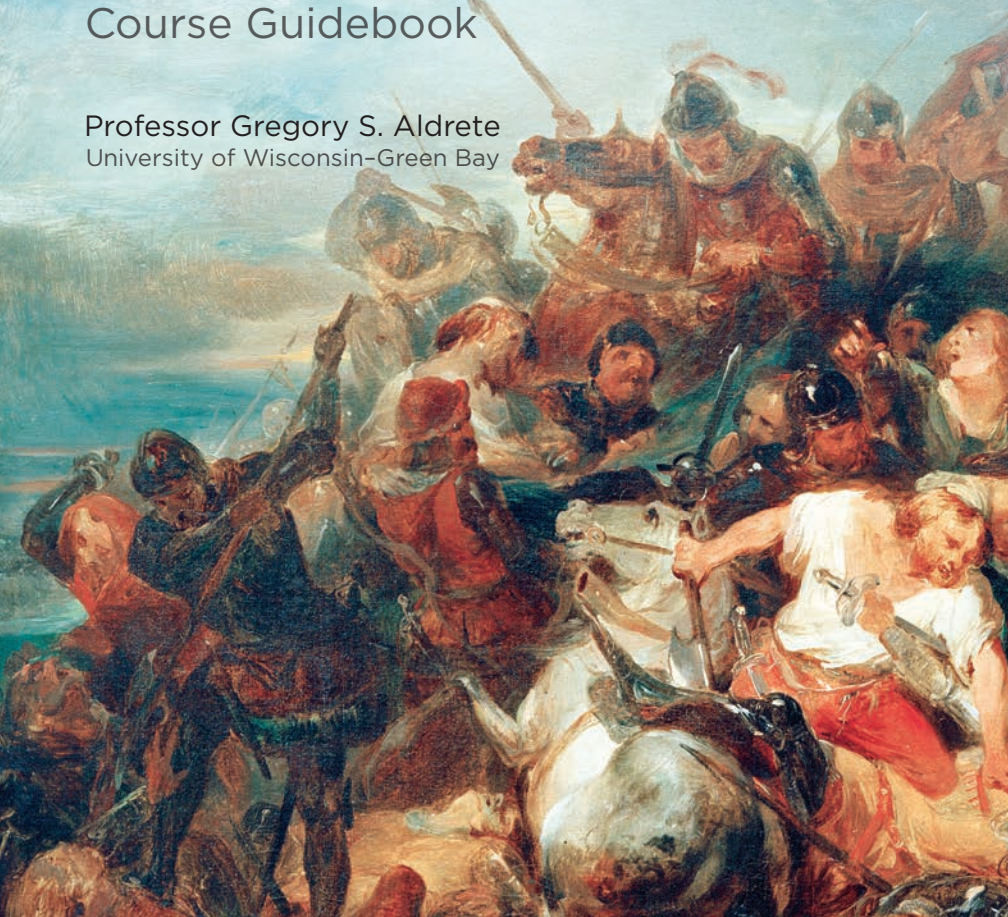
Topic  
History

Subtopic  
Military

# History's Great Military Blunders and the Lessons They Teach

Course Guidebook

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**PUBLISHED BY:**

**THE GREAT COURSES**

**Corporate Headquarters**

**4840 Westfields Boulevard, Suite 500**

**Chantilly, Virginia 20151-2299**

**Phone: 1-800-832-2412**

**Fax: 703-378-3819**

**[www.thegreatcourses.com](http://www.thegreatcourses.com)**

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**P**rofessor Gregory S. Aldrete is the Frankenthal Professor of History and Humanistic Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay. He received his B.A. from Princeton University in 1988 and his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1995. His

interdisciplinary scholarship spans the fields of history, archaeology, art history, military history, and philology.

Among the books Professor Aldrete has written or edited are *Gestures and Acclamations in Ancient Rome*; *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome*; *Daily Life in the Roman City: Rome, Pompeii, and Ostia*; *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Daily Life: A Tour through History from Ancient Times to the Present*, volume 1, *The Ancient World*; *The Long Shadow of Antiquity: What Have the Greeks and Romans Done for Us?* (with Alicia Aldrete); and *Reconstructing Ancient Linen Body Armor: Unraveling the Linothorax Mystery* (with Scott Bartell and Alicia Aldrete).

Professor Aldrete has won many awards for his teaching, including two national ones: In 2012, he was named the Wisconsin Professor of the Year by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and in 2010, he received the American Philological Association Award for Excellence in Teaching at the College Level (the national teaching award given annually by the professional association of Classics professors). Professor Aldrete also has been a University of Wisconsin System Teaching Fellow, a University of Wisconsin–Green Bay Teaching Scholar, and winner of a Teaching at Its Best award.

Professor Aldrete's research has been equally honored with a number of prestigious fellowships, including two year-long Humanities Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Solmsen Fellowship at the Institute for Research in the Humanities in Madison. Additionally, he was chosen as a fellow of two NEH seminars held at the American Academy in Rome; was a participant in an NEH institute at the University of California, Los Angeles; and was a Visiting Scholar at the American Academy in Rome. His university has given him its highest awards for both teaching and research: the Faculty Award for Excellence in Teaching and the Faculty Award for Excellence in Scholarship, both from the Founders Association.

Professor Aldrete's innovative Linothorax Project, in which he and his students reconstructed and tested ancient linen body armor, has recently garnered considerable attention from the media, having been featured in documentaries on the Discovery Channel and the Smithsonian Channel and on television programs in Canada and across Europe. It also has been the subject of articles in *U.S. News & World Report*, *The New Yorker*, *Der Spiegel*, and *Military History*, interviews on National Public Radio and the BBC, and of Internet news stories in more than two dozen countries.

Professor Aldrete maintains an active lecture schedule, including speaking to retirement groups; in elementary, middle, and high schools; and on cruise ships. He also has been named a national lecturer for the Archaeological Institute of America. For The Great Courses, he taught *History of the Ancient World: A Global Perspective* and *The Decisive Battles of World History*. ■

# Table of Contents

---

## INTRODUCTION

Professor Biography .....	i
Course Scope .....	1

## LECTURE GUIDES

### LECTURE 1

Petersburg: Union Digs Its Own Grave—1864 .....	3
---	---

### LECTURE 2

Syracuse: Athens's Second Front—413 B.C. ....	10
---	----

### LECTURE 3

Carrhae: The Parthian Shot—53 B.C. ....	17
---	----

### LECTURE 4

Red Cliffs: Cao Cao's Bad Day—208 A.D. ....	24
---	----

### LECTURE 5

Barbarian Gate: Adrianople—378, Pliska—811 .....	31
--	----

### LECTURE 6

Fourth Crusade: Byzantium Betrayed—1204 .....	39
---	----

### LECTURE 7

Kalka River: Genghis Khan's General—1223 .....	46
--	----

### LECTURE 8

Courtrai: Knights versus Shopkeepers—1302 .....	53
---	----

### LECTURE 9

Nagashino: Taking Swords to a Gunfight—1575 .....	60
---	----

### LECTURE 10

Cartagena: High Walls, Short Ladders—1741 .....	67
---	----

## Table of Contents

---

### LECTURE 11

Culloden: The Bonnie Prince Blunders—1746 .....74

### LECTURE 12

Russia: Napoleon Retreats in the Snow—1812 .....81

### LECTURE 13

Afghanistan: Khyber Pass Death Trap—1842.....88

### LECTURE 14

Crimea: Charge of the Light Brigade—1854 .....95

### LECTURE 15

Greasy Grass: Custer's Last Stand—1876 .....101

### LECTURE 16

Isandlwana: 25,000 Zulus Undetected—1879.....108

### LECTURE 17

Adwa: Italy's Fiasco in Ethiopia—1896 .....115

### LECTURE 18

Colenso: The Second Boer War—1899 .....121

### LECTURE 19

Tannenberg: Ineptitude in the East—1914 .....128

### LECTURE 20

Gallipoli: Churchill Dooms Allied Assault—1915.....135

### LECTURE 21

World War II: Royal Navy Goes Down—1941–42 .....142

### LECTURE 22

Dieppe Raid: Catastrophe on the Beach—1942 .....149

### LECTURE 23

Operation Market Garden: A Bridge Too Far—1944.....156

## Table of Contents

---

### LECTURE 24

The Great Blunders: Four Paths to Failure.....	163
--	-----

### SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Bibliography.....	170
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# History's Great Military Blunders and the Lessons They Teach

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## Scope:

Overconfidence, communication breakdowns, misjudgment of the opponent, poor planning, misinformation, stubbornness, misuse of technology, arrogance, incompetence, failure to adjust to change, and just plain bad luck—all too often, such factors have played a central role in determining the outcome of military conflicts. Although it might seem odd to focus a course on the theme of failure, it is only by understanding why plans or strategies have gone wrong in the past that we can gain knowledge of how to potentially avoid such mistakes today. This investigation becomes especially urgent in the arena of warfare. There is no field of human endeavor in which the stakes are higher or the long-term consequences greater than war. Errors committed on the battlefield are paid in the most precious commodity of all: human lives. The premise of this course is to examine some of the most notable military blunders in history to ascertain what we can learn from these instances of spectacular failure.

The blunders that we will investigate range in time from the golden age of ancient Greece through the global conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in geography from the great rivers of China to the shores of Colombia and the dusty plains of South Africa. They include notorious fiascos, such as the Gallipoli landings during World War I, as well as lesser-known events, such as the disastrous 19<sup>th</sup>-century invasion of Ethiopia by Italy and the 9<sup>th</sup>-century Battle of Pliska, in which a barbarian warlord named Krum slaughtered a Roman emperor and his entire army.

Although the specific circumstances of these blunders vary, this course reveals that over and over again, they tend to fall into four basic categories: failures of planning, failures of leadership, failures of execution, and failures of adaptation. In this course, each of these crucial categories is amply illustrated through fascinating, though often tragic, examples. Failures in planning can effectively doom one side even before battle is joined. At the same time, poor leadership has steered innumerable armies to destruction through the

arrogance or incompetence of their generals, as when George Armstrong Custer rashly plunged the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry into the midst of a vast Native American encampment at the Battle of Little Bighorn. Other armies have come to grief via miscommunication, as at the charge of the Light Brigade, or simply because of the inability to recognize when to cut one's losses and call off an unsuccessful campaign, as when Napoleon lingered too long in Moscow and, thereby, condemned his Grand Army to a miserable death in the frozen wastes of Russia. Finally, the failure to adapt to changes, especially in technology, has often determined the outcome of wars, for example, at the pivotal samurai battle of Nagashino, when victory went to the side that figured out how to most effectively employ the new technology of firearms.

Sometimes, there is more to be learned from failure than from success. Full of dramatic turns of fortune and colorful characters, this course explores the tragic but illuminating record of military misfortune. Only by confronting some of the worst and most costly blunders in human history can we hope to learn from our mistakes and avoid making the same errors in the future. ■

# Petersburg: Union Digs Its Own Grave—1864

## Lecture 1

The American Civil War tore the nation apart and resulted in the deaths of more than 600,000 soldiers. However, of all the terrible moments in this blood-drenched conflict, one was so appalling in its waste and so inept in its execution that Ulysses S. Grant was moved to label it “the saddest affair I have ever witnessed in the war.” What was this catastrophe? It was an incident that happened during the Union siege of the Confederate stronghold of Petersburg and is commonly referred to as the Battle of the Crater.

### Situation in Petersburg

- By July of 1864, it was clear that the Union had gained the upper hand in the American Civil War. Victory seemed assured, and the principal remaining questions were: Where would the final defeat of the Confederates take place? And how many more men would die before the war was finally over?
- The main effort of Grant’s armies in the east was directed toward capturing the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia. To counter this threat, Robert E. Lee, the commander of the southern forces in the area, had erected an extensive system of fortifications to guard the approaches to Richmond and thwart the Union advances.
- The key that could unlock Richmond’s defenses for Grant’s army was the city of Petersburg, which was located about 23 miles south of Richmond. Petersburg was a vital transportation node that funneled most of the supplies that enabled the defenders of Richmond to continue fighting. If Grant could seize it, the path to Richmond—and overall victory in the war—would be open.
- Recognizing the strategic importance of Petersburg, the Confederates had excavated a formidable set of fortifications around the city. After a series of costly attacks foundered against these fortifications, the Union troops also began to dig in, resulting

in opposing networks of trenches facing each other across a desolate no-man's-land. The offensive to end the war had devolved into a nightmarish stalemate.

### Henry Pleasants's Plan

- Something dramatic was needed to break the impasse, and a young officer in the Union army named Henry Pleasants thought he had the solution.
  - Pleasants proposed digging a mine that would extend from the Union trenches to a point beneath the Confederate lines. The end of the passage would be stuffed with gunpowder, then ignited, blasting a huge hole in the southerners' defenses. Northern troops could pour through the gap made by the explosion and seize control of Petersburg.
  - The spot Pleasants selected to be undermined was a Confederate strongpoint called Elliott's Salient, which projected out from the main defensive line and was only about half a mile from Petersburg itself.
- Pleasants submitted the scheme to his superior, General Ambrose Burnside. Although he had some doubts about the practicality of digging a mine of the necessary length, Burnside endorsed the plan and passed it along to General George Meade, the commander of the Army of the Potomac. Meade was even more skeptical of the idea than Burnside, but Pleasants was ultimately granted permission to attempt his mine.
- The intrepid Pleasants began digging, using just his own men and improvising the necessary tools. The proposed tunnel would have to be more than 500 feet long—longer than any previous military mine.
- When Pleasants finally calculated that they were beneath the target, two side passages were dug to hold the gunpowder. For the charge, 8,000 pounds of blasting powder was delivered and carefully stuffed into the end galleries. Sandbags were packed around the powder to direct the explosion upward, and the fuses were prepared.

## Explosion and Attack

- Meanwhile, General Burnside had been formulating plans for the attack that would follow the detonation of the mine. He made an interesting choice for the group to spearhead the assault, selecting two brigades that were composed of black soldiers, collectively known as the Fourth Division.
  - Proud to be selected, the troops of the Fourth Division enthusiastically threw themselves into a regime of specialized training in preparation for the attack.
  - When the mine went off, it would be essential to quickly exploit the hole it produced; therefore, the soldiers practiced a maneuver in which they would charge forward, then immediately wheel to the right and left of the crater to open up a path for the subsequent regiments and protect the flanks of the assault from Confederate counterattacks.
- Up to this point, the project had been a triumph of ingenuity and determination over adversity, and everything seemed in place for a bold and decisive blow that could alter the course of the war.



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**There is some debate about whether Meade's decision to replace the Fourth Division was due to racism, concern that the soldiers were untested in battle, or the desire to avoid being perceived as using black troops as cannon fodder.**

A mere 15 hours before the mine was to be set off, however, General Meade made an ill-advised change in the plan: He instructed Burnside that the well-prepared black troops were to be replaced at the head of the attack with white regiments and, instead, were to be the last group committed.

- Burnside compounded Meade's error by selecting an incompetent, cowardly alcoholic, General Ledlie, to lead the attack. Additionally, Burnside apparently failed to give clear orders to Ledlie and the other commanders. In particular, he neglected to make it clear that they were to push as rapidly as possible through the gap created by the explosion and advance toward Petersburg.
- The mine was supposed to be timed to explode at 3:30 a.m. on July 30, but when the appointed hour came, nothing happened. After waiting another 45 minutes in case the fuse was still smoldering, Pleasants dispatched a sergeant into the tunnel to investigate. The sergeant found that the fuse had gone out, and he relit it. At 4:44 a.m., the 8,000 pounds of powder at last exploded.
- Witnesses described a deep rumbling, followed by the ground erupting in a vast gout of dirt and flame. Elliott's Salient, along with an entire section of the Confederate line, was obliterated. All that was left was a massive smoking pit, 60 feet wide, 200 feet long, and between 10 to 30 feet deep. The men of Ledlie's division, who were supposed to quickly exploit the gap, were themselves stunned by the explosion. Many of them simply panicked and ran, while others milled about in confusion. For his part, General Ledlie abandoned his men, taking shelter in a medical station located in an underground dugout.
- After a delay of perhaps as long as half an hour, Ledlie's disoriented men began to trickle forward into the crater. But instead of pushing through or around the crater, the troops began to coagulate in the bottom of it, uncertain of what they were meant to do. The stunned Confederates were slow to respond, but the lackadaisical pace of the Union advance gave them the time to recover their wits, and several energetic officers began to coordinate the defenders, who opened fire on the tightly bunched and exposed Union soldiers.
- Two more Union divisions followed Ledlie's, but with their officers uncertain about their orders, they, too, failed to progress very far;

most of the men ended up crowded together in an unruly mob at the bottom of the crater. Despite the fact that the better part of three divisions were already ineffectually piled up in and around the crater, Burnside now ordered the Fourth Division to join in. However, with their formations hopelessly disrupted, their attack also bogged down.

- On the other side, the Confederates rallied their men, forming a semicircle around the Union troops and unleashing fire down on them. Confederate cannons and mortars were brought to bear on this tempting target, and Union casualties piled up in the crater. In a cruel role reversal, the very pit that had initially seemed to offer an open door through the Confederate defensive line was now transformed into a deathtrap for the men who had made it.
- By midday, it was obvious even to Meade and Burnside that the attack had failed, and those who were able were told to withdraw, while those caught too deep in Confederate territory had no choice but to surrender. In a sad postscript to the battle, many of the black troops who thus yielded were then murdered by the Confederates. Overall, of the nearly 17,000 Union troops who participated in the attack, almost 4,000 were casualties. The Confederates lost about 1,500 men.
- A Court of Inquiry placed most of the blame for this debacle on Burnside, who lost his job as a result; Ledlie voluntarily resigned. Although Meade escaped criticism in the short term, a later investigative committee concluded that if not for his last-minute change to Burnside's plan, the assault would likely have succeeded. The most tragic aspect of the attack, however, was that with its failure, the siege of Petersburg—and the war itself—would drag on for another eight months.

### **Analyzing Military Disasters**

- What can be learned from studying martial disasters such as this one? A popular theory currently used in businesses, government, and other work environments revolves around the idea of best

practices. According to this concept, people should focus on identifying actions that produce the most successful results. No doubt there is utility in this sort of exercise, but by concentrating entirely on success, there is also the danger that possible problem points will go unidentified.

- It is probably useful, at least occasionally, to reverse this strategy, and scrutinize cases of failure. Only by understanding why plans fail can we learn how to avoid such mistakes in the future. Such an investigation becomes especially urgent in the field of warfare, where errors often carry the greatest cost. Additionally, in war, slight variations in performance are often magnified because they can mean the difference between complete victory and utter defeat.
- The premise of this course is to examine some of the most notable military blunders of history, beginning in ancient Greece and extending into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to see what we can learn from these instances of failure. As we do so, a number of recurrent themes will emerge: the need for leaders to give clear orders to their subordinates and for subordinates to completely understand their primary goals, the potential danger in making last-minute changes to a carefully thought-out plans, and the risks associated with lack of cooperation among leadership, failure to anticipate challenges, and inadequate preparation.
- Over the next 23 lectures, we will see these mistakes repeated, and we will encounter a plethora of additional ones. Overconfidence, communication breakdown, poor planning, misinformation, misuse of technology, arrogance, incompetence, and more will all rear their heads to dramatically thwart even the best-laid schemes of generals. In the final lecture, we will return to this topic and see if it is possible to identify some fundamental categories of military failure.



## Suggested Reading

Hess, *Into the Crater*.

Schmutz, *The Battle of the Crater*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Does Meade, Burnside, or Ledlie deserve the greatest share of the blame for the failure of the attack, and why?
2. When trying to avoid making mistakes, do you think it is more useful to study successes or failures, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?

# Syracuse: Athens's Second Front—413 B.C.

## Lecture 2

The 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. was a tumultuous period for the independent city-states of ancient Greece. Athens was the largest city-state, while its rival, Sparta, was a slightly smaller but militarized power that considered itself the protector of the Hellenic people. Over time, Athens' expansionist aims and Sparta's protective ones would clash. On paper, Athens went into war with Sparta holding most of the advantages: a massive and superbly trained fleet and dominion over a large empire of subject and allied states that flooded Athenian coffers with annual tribute. Nevertheless, Athens would endure a stunning defeat that was both disastrous and humiliating, demonstrating that flaws in character humble even great men and ruinous tactics can hasten disaster.

### Ancient Greek Politics

- In the year 415 B.C., Athenian politics was divided between two main factions. One of these, led by the glory-seeking Alcibiades, argued for aggressively pursuing war against Sparta. The other faction—advocating peace—was led by a senior statesman named Nicias.
- Only a few years earlier, the city-states of Greece had put aside their usual rivalries to unite against an external threat from the Persian Empire, the superpower of the ancient Mediterranean. At the battles of Marathon, Salamis, and Plataea—all on Greek territory—the city-states fought together to repel Persian attacks.
  - One reason for the Greeks' triumph was that they had developed a distinctive form of warfare centered on citizen-soldiers known as *hoplites*, who were equipped with large round shields and heavy armor.
  - Spartan hoplites, in particular, were the most disciplined and feared combatants on the battlefield. Conversely, Athens maintained the largest fleet of warships and, partly because of its naval successes, assumed a leadership role in the war.

- Greece thwarted a second Persian invasion in the 470s, after which Sparta reverted back to its traditional isolationist mode. The Athenians, by contrast, organized the Delian League, a mutual-defense alliance of more than 100 Greek states established to protect members from further Persian aggression. The allied states provided a number of warships for the joint cause or contributed money each year to a common war fund.
- Athens—the largest and richest state—contributed the biggest fleet and, as time went on, asserted greater control over this coalition of peers. By the 450s, Athens was dictating policy to its partners and using their wealth for its own benefit. The resentment provoked by these actions caused a number of unaligned states to coalesce around Sparta, forming the rival Peloponnesian League.
- For decades afterward, tensions between Athens and the Peloponnesians—led by Sparta—increased. War broke out in 431 B.C. But even then, an odd stalemate ensued for the first five years of what became known as the Peloponnesian War.
  - Once a year, the Spartans invaded the Attica peninsula, and the Athenians, unwilling to confront the vaunted Spartan hoplites, retreated behind the impregnable walls of their city. Meanwhile, the powerful Athenian navy raided the Peloponnesus coastline to the southwest, but because Sparta lacked warships, little resulted from these raids. The war progressed but without a single decisive encounter.
  - The Athenian population was growing restless with this situation when Alcibiades concocted a bold new plan of attack against Sparta. In response, the elder Nicias proposed caution.

### **The Sicilian Expedition**

- The struggle between rashness and caution came to a head when a delegation from a small city on the island of Sicily appeared in Athens. One Athenian ally, Segesta, had sent this delegation to ask for help against another local rival, Selinus. Because Selinus was allied with Sicily's most powerful city-state, Syracuse, the

practical result of responding would mean war between Athens and Syracuse.

- Predictably, Alcibiades spoke in favor of sending an expedition. He argued that attacking Syracuse would help Athens in its struggle against Sparta. In response, Nicias pointed out that Athens was already locked in a serious military struggle with Sparta, and it would be unwise to provoke a second powerful opponent in Syracuse.
- The initial debate seemed to go Alcibiades's way. The Athenian people voted to dispatch a modest expedition of 60 warships to Sicily. Believing that committing a much larger military force would be unacceptable to the public, Nicias now adopted a new tack. He suggested that the proposed force be greatly increased. To his chagrin, the people took him at his word and approved the larger fleet—an armada of 100 ships.
- One dictum of military strategy is to avoid engaging a new enemy on a second front when one's forces are already occupied by a serious foe elsewhere. Yet this was exactly the course on which Athens embarked. Another military principle is that dividing supreme command among multiple generals is a recipe for disaster. Athens did this, too, appointing Nicias, Alcibiades, and a third man—a general named Lamachus—as joint commanders.
- Whether or not the provocation of Syracuse was wise, it might have succeeded under the sole command of a dynamic and daring leader, such as Alcibiades. But Alcibiades was accused of mutilating statues of Hermes, the god of travel, on the night before the fleet was to depart. Instead of confronting the charges, he fled to the Peloponnese and became a military advisor to Athens' mortal enemy, Sparta.
- Meanwhile, the Athenian armada arrived in Sicily, but Nicias's men frittered away the element of surprise by establishing contact with minor cities that had professed allegiance to Athens. Even then, the Athenians were presented a golden opportunity when

almost the entire Syracusan army massed near one of these peripheral cities just as the main Athenian force was gathering outside Syracuse.

- If Nicias and his army had pounced at that moment, they might well have captured the city and won the war. But typically, Nicias hesitated, and probably the best opportunity for victory was lost. Still, the Athenians received another chance when the Syracusan army returned home. The two sides clashed on the plains outside the city, and the first major confrontation ended to Athens' advantage. Instead of pressing the advantage, however, Nicias withdrew his army, settling down in allied territory to wait out the winter.
- The next spring, the Athenians mounted their first siege of Syracuse, which sits on a peninsula.
  - With the Athenian fleet able to blockade the harbor, the operation began promisingly. Nicias hoped that by seizing landward access to the city, he could cut it off and force its citizens to surrender.
  - He ordered two forts to be built: one on high ground, called Labdalon, and another, nicknamed the Circle, nearer to the city. The Athenians also erected two barriers outward from the Circle, one running northward and the other extending south, with the idea of holding Syracuse captive at the end of the peninsula.
- The Syracusan response was to build extensions from its own walls to intersect the Athenian ones at right angles and, thereby, prevent encirclement. What followed was an episode of furious digging, as each side raced to complete its own barrier. Meanwhile, the third Athenian general, Lamachus, was killed in a skirmish, and the cautious Nicias was left in sole command.

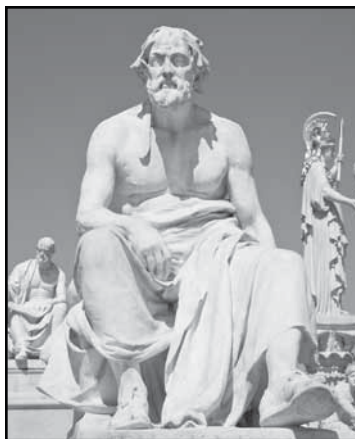
### **Involvement of Sparta**

- Back in Sparta, the Athenian traitor Alcibiades persuaded his hosts that their own cause could best be served by getting involved in the

Sicilian war. Sparta dispatched a military advisor named Gylippos, and his arrival, together with some supply ships that managed to run the blockade, rejuvenated Syracuse. The city undertook construction of yet another counter-wall.

- Nicias, feeling threatened by the new counter-wall, was forced to attack. A pitched battle was fought outside the city. This time, the Syracusans were victorious. Not only did they prevail in the skirmish, but they successfully extended their new wall, ensuring that the Athenians could not encircle them.
- At this point, the Athenians should have given up and returned home. Thus far, their losses were minimal. But the Athenian people foolishly voted to dispatch reinforcements, consisting of 70 warships and 5,000 hoplites.
- Syracuse also had been getting substantial reinforcements from Sparta and its allies. Under the leadership of Gylippos, the Syracusans now launched a sequence of attacks that drove the Athenians back into their protected encampment.
- The Athenian general Demosthenes, who was in charge of the recently arrived reinforcements, agitated for an attack to regain the initiative. He launched a daring night assault and met with initial success. But the assault disintegrated amid miscommunication and confusion. The badly demoralized Athenians now found themselves besieged in their own camp and their superiority at sea eroding in the face of new attacks.
- Recognizing that the expedition had failed, Demosthenes urged a withdrawal. But Nicias dithered, saying that he had to wait for orders from Athens. Ultimately, even Nicias agreed to evacuate, but on the eve of departure, a lunar eclipse took place.
  - Nicias took the eclipse as an omen and announced that he could not move until he had performed a ritual purification, one that would take 27 days. He retired to his tent and refused to consider alternative courses of action.

- By the time 27 days had passed, the Athenians had been trapped. They lost most of their ships in a disastrous breakout attempt. The disheartened army marched along the coast in a pathetic attempt at escape, while the triumphant Syracusans slaughtered them in droves.
- Nicias and Demosthenes were both captured and executed, and of the vast armada that had set out from Athens, not a single ship returned.



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**In the words of the great Greek historian Thucydides, the Athenians “were beaten at every point and altogether .... They were destroyed ... with a complete annihilation, their fleet, their army, everything was wiped out.”**

### **Aftermath of the Expedition**

- The Peloponnesian War would drag on for another decade, until Athens was eventually forced into a humiliating unconditional surrender. The disaster of the Sicilian expedition proved to be the decisive turning point. The hubris of Alcibiades, the dithering of Nicias, the ill-conceived second front, and the frenetic digging of the wall builders all conspired to doom mighty Athens. But even if Alcibiades’s initial idea for the expedition was ill conceived, it is fascinating to see how many opportunities the Athenians squandered to change the outcome.
- The story of the Sicilian expedition offers up a rich feast of errors and broader lessons, but a principal cause of this catastrophe was poor leadership and decision making. At key moments, when the Athenians needed caution, they got foolhardy rashness. When they needed quick action, they got hesitation and indecision.

And throughout, when they needed unity, they were crippled by factionalism and infighting.

### Suggested Reading

Fields, *Syracuse, 415–413 BC*.

Kagan, *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition*.

Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Which of the many errors committed by the Athenians during this campaign do you think was the most harmful and why?
2. How would you assess the role that Alcibiades played in these events and to what degree did his personality affect the outcome?



# Carrhae: The Parthian Shot—53 B.C.

## Lecture 3

**D**uring the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., the Roman Empire was ruled by Pompey, Julius Caesar, and Marcus Licinius Crassus. At the time of their rule, a showdown was looming to the east of Rome that would thrust Crassus into the role of military commander against the Parthian warriors of Syria. Crassus's opponent was a Parthian nobleman named Surenas. At the Battle of Carrhae in 53 B.C., one of these men—Crassus or Surenas—would commit a great blunder, proving once again that hubris can become the source of one's downfall and that military tactics that might once have been a source of invincibility can, at the hands of a capable enemy, swiftly become the means to disaster.

### Background to Carrhae

- The Roman war machine was one of the most successful in history and has been widely admired for its organization and discipline. Tough Roman legionaries carved a path from one end of the Mediterranean to the other, in the process creating one of the world's most enduring empires.
- By the early 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., however, the Roman Republic had begun to collapse under the strain of internal tensions. In part, this was due to the actions of ambitious politicians, such as Marius and Sulla, who undermined the institutions of the republic in their own quests for power. After Marius and Sulla came Pompey, known for his conquest of the east, and Julius Caesar, who made his reputation in Gaul.
- As Pompey and Caesar jockeyed for supremacy, a third man rose in power. This was Crassus, who came from a respected aristocratic family. During his youth, as the civil war raged between Marius and Sulla, Crassus had been a member of Sulla's faction. Pompey was also on the Sullan side but had developed a dislike of Crassus.

- Despite such tensions, all three members of the First Triumvirate were pragmatists. Once they rose to the height of power in Rome, they realized that—at least in the short term—there was more to gain by working together. Thus, they created an informal alliance to govern the state.
  - This arrangement involved divvying up the empire, with Caesar continuing his campaigns in Gaul to the north, Pompey basing himself in Spain to the west, and Crassus being allotted Syria in the east. Although the members of the triumvirate were notionally equals, Crassus was keenly aware that the one area in which Pompey and Caesar enjoyed a superior reputation was military conquests.
  - The Parthian Empire was the contemporary heir to Persia, which had been conquered by Alexander the Great; Parthia occupied a similar geographic region to Persia, centered on Mesopotamia. In November of 55 B.C., Crassus set off for Roman Syria, near the Parthian border.

### The Campaign in Syria

- Crassus commanded a typical Roman fighting force of the time, which emphasized heavy infantry. These were the famed Roman legionaries: tough, well-trained foot soldiers, who fought mainly with the *gladius*—a deadly short sword—and who defended themselves with heavy armor and large shields. Crassus had seven legions, totaling about 35,000 men. He also had 4,000 lighter-armed auxiliary infantry and a contingent of 4,000 light cavalry. With these



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**For Crassus, the ultimate role model was Alexander the Great, who earned his name by conquering the Persian Empire; Crassus's invasion of Parthia plainly showed that he harbored dreams of emulating Alexander.**

forces, Crassus was confident that victory over Parthia was all but assured.

- The Parthians, in contrast, employed almost no infantry at Carrhae. Instead, they deployed two kinds of mounted warriors. The most numerous of these were lightly armored horse archers, wielding powerful compound bows. A second type of Parthian warrior at Carrhae was the *cataphract*. These were heavily armored noblemen who carried long lances and rode especially large horses.
- Crassus met with initial success after he arrived in Syria in mid-54 B.C. He moved his army into northern Mesopotamia, defeated a number of local Parthian administrators, and subdued a string of wealthy towns. Then, he and his men settled down until the following spring to organize the newly won territory and tally up the captured loot.
- The King of Parthia—Orodes II—used the winter pause by Crassus to prepare his defense against the invasion. He raised two armies and commanded the main one himself. It was poised along the likely invasion route—at the border with Armenia—which at the time was a Roman ally.
- Meanwhile, the Parthian king had ordered one of his noblemen to assemble a second army and position it in Mesopotamia. This nobleman was from the clan of Suren and, thus, is commonly referred to as Surenas. He was the second most powerful man in the Parthian Empire after Orodes, and the king viewed him with suspicion as a potential rival.
- Crassus faced a major decision: By what route should he invade? One option was to take the longer path, through the allied state of Armenia. Another option was to continue directly into Mesopotamia, through the desert. Eager for glory, the Roman leader chose to push straight into Mesopotamia. To counter this advance, Surenas had assembled an army of 10,000 men, of whom 9,000

were rapid-moving horse archers and 1,000 were the hard-hitting, armor-bound cataphracts.

- On June 9, 53 B.C., as Crassus paused beside a river, a group of his Roman scouts encountered Surenas and was repulsed with heavy losses. Although Crassus's men were fatigued from the morning march and his officers counseled making camp for the night, the Roman commander cut short the break and ordered his men forward. Thus began the Battle of Carrhae.

### **Rout of the Romans**

- The Roman advance was confused, with the men arrayed in a long line of infantry and the cavalry on its wings. This was a standard Roman battle formation and one that Crassus's officers had advised him to adopt. After deploying, however, Crassus ordered the Roman soldiers to rearrange themselves into a colossal hollow square. On the other side, Surenas arranged his men in a manner that concealed their numbers.
- Surenas opened the battle by ordering a charge of the cataphracts. Crassus's men expertly hunkered down behind the wall of their shields and fought off the assault. Wisely, Surenas did not press the attack but withdrew and sent forward the 9,000 light-mount archers. These encircled the Roman formation, unleashing volley after volley of arrows. Whenever the heavily laden Romans tried to run out and engage them, the agile horsemen darted away.
- To be tormented by a foe that repeatedly pulled back must have been frustrating for the Romans, but Crassus and his men were probably not worried yet. The Romans knew that if they could simply endure the assault for a short time, the archers would exhaust their store of arrows, and the invading force would then gain its opportunity.
- Now, however, the genius of Surenas was fully revealed. Before the battle began, he had organized 1,000 pack camels into a continuous relay to deliver ammunition to his archers on the battlefield. After firing off a quiver of arrows, an archer could grab a new supply

from the nearest camel and, thus, maintain a steady rain of attack on the beleaguered Romans.

- The situation began to look much grimmer for Crassus. The Parthian bows demonstrated an unnerving ability to penetrate the Romans' armor, and casualties mounted, even as the Roman foot soldiers were unable to close on their mounted opponents. Crassus decided his best bet was to break out his own cavalry. It would be supported by the few archers he possessed and about 4,000 infantry.
  - The core of the group consisted of 1,000 Gallic horsemen led by Crassus's son Publius. As Publius bravely advanced, the Parthians gave way, thereby encouraging the Romans. The Romans swarmed forward and at last seemed to be getting the upper hand. But once again, Surenas had set a trap.
  - As soon as Publius had moved beyond the range of the main formation to provide reinforcement, the fleeing Parthians unexpectedly turned and fell on him. Although the Gauls fought desperately—even diving from their horses to stab at the unarmored bellies of the rival Parthian mounts—the Romans were cut down.
  - Publius and other survivors took refuge on high ground. With his right arm disabled and the enemy closing in, the son of the Roman commander ordered an aide to kill him. The victorious Parthians chopped off Publius's head and stuck it on the end of a lance, brandishing it aloft to taunt Crassus.
- Crassus bore the death of his son stoically, but his troops were now in a bad position. The hail of arrows resumed, more men fell, and the morale of the soldiers plummeted. Crassus still had perhaps 20,000 combat-capable men, and when night came, the Roman leader decided to sneak away and save what remained of his army. This meant abandoning thousands of wounded on the battlefield.
- The next day, the Parthians advanced over the previous evening's battlefield and slaughtered the remaining wounded. Behind the

walls of the small Roman garrison at Carrhae, Crassus's men split into groups and tried to escape. Some were successful. Most, including Crassus and his men, were caught.

- Surenas offered to parley with the Romans over surrender terms and arranged a meeting. However, during negotiations, a scuffle broke out, and Crassus and his remaining men were killed. Of more than 40,000 Romans who had marched into Mesopotamia, 20,000 lay dead, 10,000 more had been captured, and fewer than 10,000 survivors trickled back to Syria.

### Lessons of Carrhae

- The death of Crassus paved the way for a showdown between the triumvirate's two remaining rulers, Pompey and Caesar, and the overthrow of the Roman Republic. Caesar ultimately won this struggle, of course, although he, in turn, fell to assassins' daggers only a few years later. In the interim, the victory at Carrhae firmly established Parthia as Rome's main rival and curbed further Roman expansion to the east.
- The Battle of Carrhae illustrates a number of lessons. First of all, it is a classic example of how a strategy or tool that works well in one situation can be entirely unsuited to a different context. In this case, the heavy infantry of the Roman legions, which had been invincible on so many battlefields, were—when placed in the open desert—unable to deal with a swift enemy mounted on horseback. Similarly, Crassus's impulsive, unschooled generalship provides the cautionary lesson that one should know one's limitations.
- Crassus made a number of crucial errors, beginning with his failure to stockpile his army with sufficient numbers of cavalry and archers, then spurning an ally's aid. That was followed by his rash neglect to properly scout out the enemy and the terrain. He did not listen to experienced advisors and repeatedly allowed his eagerness for battle to lead him into traps. He was a superlative politician and businessman but, at best, a mediocre general.

## Suggested Reading

Sampson, *The Defeat of Rome in the East*.

Sheldon, *Rome's Wars in Parthia*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Which do you think had more to do with the outcome of the battle, Crassus's mistakes or Surenas's strategies?
2. This battle illustrates the concept that success in one context does not always carry over to a different situation. What steps might successful groups or individuals take to avoid making this common error?

# Red Cliffs: Cao Cao's Bad Day—208 A.D.

## Lecture 4

**E**ven outstanding commanders can have a bad day, and that seems to have been the case at one of the most celebrated conflicts in Chinese history: the Battle of Red Cliffs. The general who made the uncharacteristically poor showing there was a warlord named Cao Cao. This man was ruthless and ambitious, but he was also a savvy politician, an able administrator, a renowned poet, and a clever general. By the time of the Battle at Red Cliffs, he had amassed a long record of victorious campaigns. On that day, however, his army suffered an embarrassing defeat that ended his dreams of consolidating China under his control.

### Collapse of the Han Empire

- By 190 A.D., the once-mighty Han Empire, which had ruled China for nearly four centuries, was beginning to totter. The Hans were faced with dynastic infighting sparked by court eunuchs who were trying to seize power and by a peasant uprising known as the Yellow Turban Rebellion.
- The result of these challenges was the collapse of the central government. The emperor was forced to flee, and the empire broke into at least eight sections, each controlled by a warlord. Many of these regional leaders claimed to be loyal to the imperial family. Although this may have been true for some, others were plainly out to grab as much power and territory as they could.
- One of the most able of the opportunists was Cao Cao. He came from a well-connected family, had received an excellent education, and was appointed to various civil and military posts that enabled him to rise rapidly in the ranks of the bureaucracy. He was a renowned poet, as well as an avid reader of works on military theory; in fact, he composed several of his own, including one of the first commentaries on Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*.



- Cao Cao's career took off during the Yellow Turban Rebellion. He was appointed as an officer in the cavalry and dispatched to a district to suppress a peasant uprising. He energetically carried out the task, which led to further missions and promotions. By the mid-190s, the government had collapsed, the emperor was powerless, and the Han Empire had disintegrated into more than a half dozen regions controlled by rival warlords. Cao Cao survived the chaos, emerging as one of the warlords.

### **Competing Warlords**

- Cao Cao's stronghold was Yingchuan, in northern China, where he portrayed himself as the rightful protector of the emperor. The emperor himself endorsed these claims, sheltering at times with Cao Cao, granting him official titles, and recognizing him as governor of several large provinces. Of course, Cao Cao's critics accused him of manipulating the emperor for his own purposes and asserted that he planned to eventually dispose of the emperor and seize power for himself.
- Whatever his intentions, Cao Cao embarked on a long series of campaigns whose aim was to conquer other regions of China and reunify the country. The first order of business was to consolidate his hold over the north. His rival in the area was a general named Yuan Shao, whose army was more than double the size of Cao Cao's. Nevertheless, Cao Cao confidently began his campaign.
  - The turning point came when Cao Cao sent raiders to destroy several of Yuan Shao's supply depots. He also attacked and burned a convoy of supply wagons. Cao Cao then fell upon the starving and discouraged army of his enemy and completely routed it.
  - This conflict, which is usually referred to as the Battle of Guandu, took place in 200 A.D. It is still studied as a model for how to use a smaller force to overcome a larger one.

- Cao Cao spent the next seven years in further conquests. The stage was set for his attempt to add southern China to his domain.
- By now, the major players in China had been reduced to three warlords and their respective territories: Cao Cao in the north (the Wei kingdom), Sun Quan in the south (the Wu kingdom), and Liu Bei to the southwest (the Shu kingdom). Liu Bei was Cao Cao's most intractable foe. Sun Quan was less openly hostile to Cao Cao but was an ambitious general in his own right whose goal was to found his own dynasty.

### Maneuvering in the South

- The main conflict among Cao Cao, Liu Bei, and Sun Quan was sparked in 208 when yet another of the Chinese warlords of this time, Liu Biao, died, precipitating a power struggle for his former territory. Liu Biao had been the ruler of the important province of Jing, which controlled the central section of the Yangtze River, one of the two main rivers of China and a vital communication route.



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With the addition of Liu Bei's men to his own, Cao Cao was able to call on an army said to number 800,000 warriors, although the real figure was probably a quarter of that amount.

- Liu Bei's bid to control the Yangtze and surrounding territory was thwarted by Cao Cao, who knew that he had to acquire this important transportation node for himself if he hoped to take the south. Cao Cao not only acquired the territory, but he gained the allegiance of the former ruler's military. As befitted a region centered on a river, the main part of this force consisted of 70,000 marines and 1,000 boats. With these soldiers added to his own, Cao Cao was by far the most powerful man in China.
- Liu Bei was determined to prevent Cao Cao's further expansion, but he needed allies to do so. The natural person to turn to was the third warlord, Sun Quan. Unfortunately, Sun Quan and Liu Bei had a longstanding animosity. Each knew that if he managed to defeat Cao Cao, he would likely end up fighting the other. Nevertheless, the menace of Cao Cao was so pressing that Liu Bei sent his aide, the clever strategist Zhuge Liang, to meet with Sun Quan and attempt to forge an alliance.
- At the same time, Cao Cao also proposed an alliance to Sun Quan, knowing that he would have an easier time conquering the south if he could keep Sun Quan and Liu Bei divided. Cao Cao's message arrived at Sun Quan's court just before Liu Bei's ambassador, Liang. A debate then took place in Sun Quan's court, with various advisors advocating different paths of action.
- Liang was brought before Sun Quan, but for all his supposed cleverness, he initially bungled the assignment, offending Sun Quan by excessively praising Liu Bei. He quickly realized the error and switched tactics, saying that Liu Bei did not really need any help because Cao Cao's northern men would be fighting in unfamiliar, swampy territory and would be so exhausted from their long march that they would easily fall prey to the southerners. Persuaded, Sun Quan sent 30,000 of his troops to support Liu Bei.

### **Clash at the Red Cliffs**

- As anticipated, Cao Cao's forces began their invasion, reaching the banks of the Yangtze near Wulin. Cao Cao planned to advance

down the river with part of his army aboard his fleet and the rest marching along the northern bank. Although Cao Cao had fought many campaigns in the past, riverine warfare was new to him and to his troops. Further, many of the men found the wet conditions disconcerting, and they were fatigued from their long march.

- Because Cao Cao's northerners were suffering from seasickness, he ordered his ships to be tied together several rows deep, creating an enormous floating raft. This may have created a more stable platform, but it rendered his fleet nearly immobile and made it incapable of maneuvering. It was a fatal error and reveals Cao Cao's inexperience at riverine warfare. Fastened in this manner, the fleet was anchored beneath some red cliffs. This geographical feature inspired the name by which the battle has become known.
- The southern allies of Liu Bei and Sun Quan decided to attack Cao Cao's northerners using fire ships. One of the allied naval commanders sent a message to Cao Cao that he and his squadron were planning to defect. Cao Cao told the commander to join his ships to the northern fleet. This was another misstep. Cao Cao should have ordered the purported traitor to surrender his vessels at a neutral location rather than letting them get close to his own ships.
- The supposedly defecting boats were loaded with flammable materials. They set off under full sail for Cao Cao's tethered ships. Too late, Cao Cao became suspicious, but his warships, because they were tied together, were unable to take evasive action. The crews aboard the fire ships ignited their combustible cargoes and plunged into the helpless mass of Cao Cao's fleet like flaming torpedoes. Meanwhile, other ships in the southern coalition swarmed forward, unleashing flights of arrows and adding to the northern side's confusion.
- Although Cao Cao still had a large army on shore, the sudden destruction of his fleet seems to have completely unnerved the commander and his men. Cao Cao himself escaped, fleeing northward. His dismayed army fell apart; many soldiers became

densely packed while trying to escape along the main road. The jubilant southerners sliced into the panicky throng, inflicting massive casualties. Others attempted to flee across swampy ground. Bogged down in a nightmare of mud, they, too, were slaughtered.

### **Errors of Cao Cao**

- Red Cliffs was a thorough defeat and clearly a significant setback for Cao Cao. From that time on, he was forced to shift his attention to consolidating the north and abandoned his ambitions of conquering all of China. It was a pivotal event in Chinese history, ensuring that most of the next century would be taken up by violent civil wars.
- How such a previously competent, even gifted, commander could have blundered so badly in this battle is a bit of a puzzle. Cao Cao's actions violate a number of the dicta in his own writings and in those of Sun Tzu. He was uncharacteristically taken in by an obvious ploy with the supposed defection; further, the incendiary attack should not have thrown him because Cao Cao himself had earlier used the same tactics when he burned the supply train of his enemy in the Guandu campaign.
- The inexperience of Cao Cao and his men at naval warfare, along with the marshy terrain, fatigue from the long march, and the effects of disease outbreaks, may all have contributed to this crushing defeat. Overall, the battle illustrates that even among good leaders, it is difficult to always make the right decisions and that such lapses can have dire consequences.
- Cao Cao ruled the north for more than a decade after the Red Cliffs battle and was succeeded by his son, who became the first emperor of the Wei dynasty. Liu Bei consolidated rule over his southern provinces and proclaimed himself an emperor. The third warlord, Sun Quan, reigned for another 30 years and, like Cao Cao, was succeeded by his son.

## Suggested Reading

De Crespigny, *Imperial Warlord*.

Tjoa, *The Battle of Chibi (Red Cliffs)*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What do you think accounts for Cao Cao's uncharacteristically poor generalship at Red Cliffs?
2. Both Cao Cao and Crassus in the previous lecture suffered from having their stories told by hostile sources. To what degree does the cliché "the winners write history" apply to their cases, and do they deserve their negative reputations?

# Barbarian Gate: Adrianople—378, Pliska—811

## Lecture 5

The two battles discussed in this lecture took place more than 400 years apart in time, but they share a number of similarities. Both pitted armies of the eastern Roman Empire—later known as the Byzantine Empire—against a tribe of barbarians from the north. In each case, the barbarians initially sought refuge within the Roman Empire but later turned against the central power. In both eras, the campaign began promisingly for the Romans, but then the emperors involved became overconfident and careless. Such attitudes resulted in the two emperors leading their respective armies into perilous situations. Finally, each battle was a complete disaster for the Romans.

### Background to Adrianople

- In the three centuries before the Battle of Adrianople, the Roman Empire had undergone a dramatic series of ups and downs. From the golden age of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., Rome descended into the chaos of the early and mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century, when civil wars, barbarian invasions, and economic collapse brought the empire to the brink of dissolution.
- During the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century, however, a remarkable succession of practical soldier-emperors drove off the barbarians and stabilized the empire. The longstanding tendency of the empire to split into eastern and western halves was formalized, and each section now had its own emperor and capital city. By the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Roman-ruled world had settled into relative stability.
- Rome's greatest rival was an eastern successor state to the Parthians, known as the Sassanians. In addition, numerous so-called barbarian tribes, nations, and confederations lined the borders of the eastern and western empires. At various moments, individual tribes were enemies, friends, or allies with either or both of the Roman empires.
- The emperor of the eastern Roman Empire in 378 was Valens. The emperor of the western empire was Valens's nephew Gratian.

## Gothic Immigrants

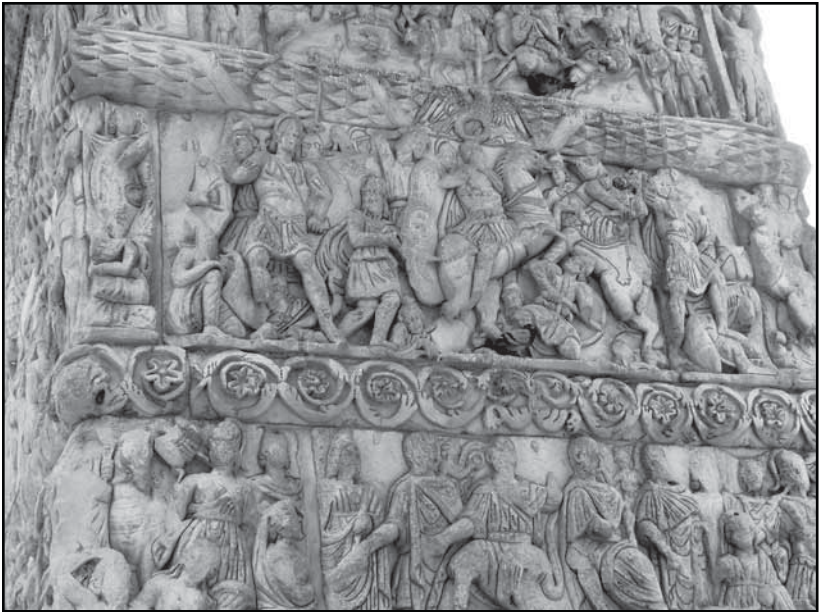
- The people known as the Goths consisted of a number of loosely related tribes that were said to have originated in Scandinavia. They had become migratory in the centuries before Adrianople, eventually occupying a territory that stretched from the Danube to the Crimea.
  - Historians often label the two main Gothic groups who participated in Adrianople as the Ostrogoths and the Visigoths. Although the Goths at Adrianople were the ancestors of these later groups, they were more properly known as the Tervingi and the Greuthungi at the time of the battle.
  - The most important Gothic chieftain was Fritigern, who seems to have been an able general.
- What brought the Goths into conflict with Rome were the actions of yet another barbarian group, the Huns. These were nomads who roamed the central Asian steppe and were outstanding horsemen and archers. They began to migrate westward, moving into the territory of yet another group, the Alans.
  - After defeating the Alans, the Huns moved further westward, encroaching on the lands of the Gothic Greuthungi. The Greuthungi were also defeated, with many fleeing eastward ahead of the Huns.
  - The next Gothic group to be menaced was the Tervingi. When they, too, were unable to cope with the Huns, they sent a request to Valens, seeking permission to cross the Danube and take refuge in Roman territory.
- Valens granted the Goths' request for refuge. The local Danubian administrators were instructed to allow the Goths to cross the river and to provide the refugees with supplies and assistance. However, the administrators used the arrival of the refugees as a chance to enrich themselves. They appropriated much of the food intended for the Goths, selling it for profit or offering it to the Goths at exorbitant prices.



- The starving Goths naturally began to resent such treatment; fearing an uprising, the local administrators apparently decided to nullify this potential threat by inviting the leading Goths to a banquet and murdering them.
  - Fritigern and the other Gothic chieftains attended but were tipped off about the Roman intentions. A scuffle broke out, and a number of Romans and Goths were killed, but Fritigern managed to escape. He then launched an open rebellion.
  - The same administrator who had tried to kill Fritigern now pursued him with local Roman army detachments. A pitched battle took place in which the enraged Goths wiped out the Romans.
  - Some of the Greuthungi then took advantage of the Romans' weakness to cross the Danube and join the rebels.

### **The Campaign and Battle of Adrianople**

- With the Goths now effectively controlling all of Thrace, Valens could no longer ignore the situation. He hastily concluded a peace treaty with the Sassanians, sent a message requesting military aid to Gratian, and began assembling a large force of frontline troops near Constantinople. Finally, in 378, Valens was ready to take the field himself.
- On June 11, the emperor marched to the city of Adrianople. The Goths had remained divided in order to scavenge enough food to survive, but Fritigern now concentrated his forces, moving them southward toward Adrianople.
  - The Roman army probably totaled 15,000 to 20,000 men but was outnumbered by the Goths.
  - Valens passed Adrianople and continued westward in search of the Goths, probably also hoping to join up with Gratian and his army, who were marching in from Italy.



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**In choosing to attack the Goths, Valens may have smugly assumed that his professional soldiers could easily beat a mere rabble of barbarians.**

- Seeing an opportunity to cut Valens's supply lines, Fritigern dashed southward, intending to seize the road behind Valens's army. Roman scouts detected this movement, and Valens now had to make a crucial choice: whether to wait for Gratian to arrive or to attack immediately. Perhaps foolishly, Valens chose the second option.
- Fritigern sent a priest to Valens with an offer of peace, but Valens ignored the entreaty. On August 9, Valens left Adrianople and marched toward the Goths.
- The Goths had drawn up their wagons into a defensive laager on some high ground. The Roman cavalry set up as a screen, behind which the slower-moving infantry deployed into battle formation, facing the Goths.
  - Because the large contingent of Greuthungi cavalry had not yet returned from a foraging expedition, Fritigern sent them a

message urgently ordering them back. He then sought to delay the Romans by dispatching envoys asking to open negotiations.

- Valens, having decided to fight, should have commenced combat. Instead, he allowed himself to be drawn into negotiations.
- The cavalry unit on the far left of the Roman line now seems to have disobeyed orders and launched a premature attack on the Goths opposite them.
  - After initially driving back the Goths, the cavalry scouts were routed by a counterattack and fell back in confusion, disrupting the Roman lines.
  - Just as the cavalry withdrew, the Greuthungi made their appearance on the same side of the field and joined the attack.
  - Fritigern committed the rest of his troops to a general assault all along the line, and the two sides crashed together in a hand-to-hand struggle.
- Having driven off the cavalry on the Roman left, the Gothic horsemen were now able to strike at this exposed side of the Roman line. Under assault from two directions, the Roman line crumbled, and most of the Roman units fled. Somewhere in the chaos, Valens was killed. Thirty-five senior officers and two-thirds of the Roman army also perished on the battlefield, making it one of the worst military disasters in all of Roman history.

### **The Battle of Pliska**

- The western empire collapsed about 70 years later, but the eastern empire flourished for centuries more, eventually becoming known as the Byzantine Empire. Some 433 years after Adrianople, this empire suffered another devastating defeat.
- The emperor this time was Nicephorus I, and like Valens, he was having problems with immigrants.

- In the late 7<sup>th</sup> century, the Bulgars, a Turkic tribe, had petitioned to cross the Danube into Byzantine territory. The emperor at the time was reluctant to accept them, but the Bulgars entered anyway and seized a large chunk of territory north of Thrace, where they established the Bulgar khanate.
- In 811, the newly enthroned Nicephorus I assembled a large army to expel the Bulgars.
- The leader of the Bulgars was an experienced warrior named Krum. Believing that he did not have sufficient troops to oppose Nicephorus, Krum decided to abandon his capital, Pliska, and take to the nearby mountains.
  - Nicephorus advanced triumphantly into Pliska and massacred the small garrison left behind there. The Byzantines then burned down the city and ravaged the countryside.
  - In response, Krum made peace overtures, but Nicephorus was intent on destroying the Bulgars and refused to even open talks.
- Nicephorus then set off in pursuit of Krum, who had retreated into the Varbica Pass in the mountains, where he erected defenses. Arrogantly believing that his foe was beaten, Nicephorus neglected to properly scout the pass and confidently marched his army into its narrow confines. Deep into the pass, he found the way blocked by wooden palisades and Krum's men lurking along the hilltops.
- Rather than attempting to escape the way he had come, Nicephorus ordered the army to halt for the night. And instead of consolidating his forces, he allowed his men to camp where they were, in separate, strung-out groups.
- Just before dawn on September 26, Krum attacked, focusing his efforts on the imperial encampment. The assault seems to have caught the sleeping camp by surprise. Rampaging Bulgars broke in among the tents and slaughtered their inhabitants.

- As the terrified survivors fled, they spread panic to other contingents of the Byzantine army. With rumors spreading that the emperor was dead, these units, too, broke and ran.
- Desperate Byzantine soldiers tried to climb the wooden barriers that hemmed them in, but the Bulgars set these alight, and many Byzantines were burned alive. Others were hunted down in the woods and killed.
- Although the fight took place in the mountain pass, it has become known as the Battle of Pliska and was the worst disaster for Byzantium since Adrianople. Tens of thousands of men, along with the emperor and much of his court, died.

### **Lessons from Two Battles**

- The two battles of Adrianople and Pliska mark distinct stages in the slow decline of the Byzantine Empire and share a number of curious similarities.
- Both were defeats triggered by the Romans' failure to deal with immigrant barbarian groups who might otherwise have been converted into allies. Especially in the case of the Goths, the arrogant and demeaning treatment the Romans dealt the immigrants sparked their rebellion.
- Also, in each instance, a Roman emperor's overconfidence resulted in multiple poor tactical decisions. Both emperors led their armies into exposed and dangerous positions. Once the attacks began, they failed to provide the leadership that might have saved the situation.
- The consequences for both men were defeat and ignominious death. As for Fritigern and Krum, both died, apparently of natural causes, within three years of their victories.

## Suggested Reading

Barbero, *The Day of the Barbarians*.

Fine, *The Early Medieval Balkans*.

Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*.

Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*.

MacDowall, *Adrianople, AD 378*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Do you think accommodation with the Goths and Bulgars was possible, or was conflict with Rome inevitable for each of them? What issues with migration and immigration are revealed by these events?
2. Which emperor, Valens or Nicephorus, made the greater errors leading to his respective defeat?

# Fourth Crusade: Byzantium Betrayed—1204

## Lecture 6

On May 4, 2001, in a speech addressed to the Greek Orthodox archbishop of Athens, Pope John Paul II expressed regret for an event that had occurred 800 years earlier. What prompted this belated act of contrition? It was the Fourth Crusade, which in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, went astray from its professed mission of wresting control of the Holy Lands from Muslim rulers. Instead, a Christian army attacked and looted the city of Constantinople, the seat of Greek Orthodox Christianity and a supposed ally of the Crusaders. The diversion of the Fourth Crusade and the sack of Constantinople constituted one of the more shameful episodes of the Crusades and would have far-reaching consequences in the history of the Mediterranean.

### Lead-Up to the Fourth Crusade

- The Crusades began in 1095 at the Council of Clermont, when Pope Urban II issued a call for volunteers to embark on an expedition to seize the Holy Lands and “liberate” them from pagan occupation by Muslims. Lured by various motives, ranging from piety to greed, thousands of knights across Europe volunteered to take up the cross.
  - When this formidable army reached its target, the local Islamic rulers were taken by surprise, and the First Crusade achieved its goals in spectacular fashion. A number of cities, including Jerusalem, were besieged and captured, and several Crusader kingdoms were carved out in the Holy Lands.
  - The Middle Eastern caliphates soon counterattacked, and thus began a military struggle that would last for several centuries. During this period, various Christian popes periodically called for further Crusades, but none was as successful as the First.
- In August 1198, a new pope, Innocent III, issued an official proclamation summoning volunteers for a Fourth Crusade. The leaders of this Crusade decided to transport their forces by sea. To accomplish this, they required a vast fleet of ships; thus, they

turned to the preeminent Christian sea power of the day, the city-state of Venice.

- The leader of the Venetian state was the elderly Doge Enrico Dandolo. He negotiated a contract with the Crusaders under which Venice would provide ships to carry and protect more than 30,000 men and 4,500 horses. In return, the Crusaders promised to pay 85,000 silver marks and to give Venice half of whatever plunder they acquired.
- The Venetians threw themselves into fulfilling their side of the contract, devoting all necessary manpower to a frenzy of construction to prepare the necessary ships.
- The designated sailing date for the expedition was June 29, 1202, and by then, the Venetians had the fleet ready. So far, everything seemed to be going well for the Fourth Crusade, but events were underway that would conspire to derail the expedition. The most important of these was a squabble over succession taking place at the court of the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople.
  - Christianity had split into two branches, with the pope in Rome the head of what would become the Catholic Church, while Constantinople was the seat of the Eastern Orthodox Church.
  - On the surface, the Byzantine Empire still appeared to be a potent military and political force, but there was a rottenness at its core. The Byzantine fleet had been neglected, and the army was in decline.
  - Since 1185, the Byzantine emperor had been Isaac II, a weak ruler. In 1195, Isaac was deposed by a coup in favor of his brother Alexius III. Upon seizing the throne, Alexius III ordered Isaac to be blinded; he then threw Isaac and his son (Prince Alexius) into prison.
  - Prince Alexius was determined to overthrow his uncle. After escaping from prison to Europe, he began traveling from court to court, seeking assistance in his quest.



- Meanwhile, as the date for launching the Crusade approached, the leaders found themselves unable to pay the full sum they had promised to the Venetians before setting sail.
  - Doge Dandolo came up with a proposal to resolve this problem. Venice was currently engaged in a dispute with the city of Zadar, located on the Dalmatian coast in modern-day Croatia. Venice coveted Zadar because of its strategic location, but the city had given its allegiance to the king of Hungary.
  - Dandolo told the Crusaders that if they helped conquer Zadar, they could postpone payment of the rest of the fee until after the campaign in the Holy Lands, when presumably they would be rich with plunder. In addition, the blind, elderly Dandolo said that he himself would join the expedition, along with a sizable force of Venetians.
  - The Crusaders had sworn to fight Muslims in the east but were now contemplating the attack of a Christian city and fellow Crusader.
  - Desperate to pay off their debt, the Fourth Crusade's leaders agreed to Dandolo's proposal. In October of 1202, the fleet set sail, crossing the Adriatic to Zadar.

### **Campaigns in Zadar and Constantinople**

- The fleet arrived at Zadar, and the unfortunate city was attacked, captured, and looted. Pope Innocent III was so enraged at this act that he formally excommunicated the Crusaders. Eventually, Innocent relented on the conditions that restitution be made to the king of Hungary and that the Crusaders promise not to attack any more Christians.
- The Crusaders settled down to wait out the stormy winter sailing season. Then, a message from Prince Alexius arrived. He said that if the Crusaders would help restore him to the throne of the Byzantine Empire, he would pay them 200,000 marks and make the Greek

Orthodox Church subservient to the pope. Prince Alexius also pledged that he would join the Crusade, along with 10,000 troops.

- Once again, the Crusade leaders allowed their desperation to pay off their debt to overcome their ethics and agreed to Prince Alexius's proposal. They set sail, arriving near Constantinople in June of 1203. Constantinople was bordered on three sides by water and protected by 3.5 miles of walls. Blocking the narrow water entryway known as the Golden Horn was a massive iron chain, attached to a strongpoint on the opposite shore called the Galata Tower. These stout fortifications had withstood every attempt to breach them over the previous 900 years.
- After establishing a base, the Crusaders launched their first assault on July 5. They realized that if they could break through the chain and enter the Golden Horn, they could attack weaker sections of the city walls. The Crusaders made their landing on a beach near the Galata Tower and, after a short, intense fight, stormed it. This allowed them to detach the iron chain, opening up the Golden Horn to their ships.
- Now, however, the Crusaders had to find a way to breach Constantinople's fabled walls. The main Crusader force encamped outside Constantinople, on the landward side. The plan was for the Crusaders to attack there while the Venetians made an assault on the walls around the Golden Horn from their ships. After a week of preliminary bombardment, the battle began.
  - The Venetians struggled to make a landing. To inspire them, Doge Dandolo ordered his ship to deposit him on the beach. Seeing their leader imperiled, the Venetians charged forward and succeeded in obtaining a beachhead. When the Venetians temporarily gained control of a gate, a fire broke out and quickly spread, eventually destroying 120 acres of the city.
  - To retake the initiative, Alexius III personally led a sortie out from Constantinople. This caught the Crusaders by surprise, giving Alexius III an opportunity to rout the invaders, but

incredibly, he failed to press the attack and meekly returned to the city. This demoralized his men and made the Byzantine nobility lose faith in his leadership.

- Sensing his people turning against him, Alexius III grabbed 1,000 pounds of gold and fled the city in the middle of the night. The Byzantine nobles released Isaac from prison and, despite his blindness, acclaimed him once more as emperor.
- In the Crusader camp, Prince Alexius insisted that the Crusaders place him on the throne to fulfill their agreement. A meeting was arranged at which the Crusaders demanded that Isaac honor the contract they had made with his son by appointing Prince Alexius co-emperor. Isaac agreed, although he probably knew that he would be unable to fulfill all the terms of the contract. On the surface, however, there was peace.
- Hostility began to grow when Isaac and Prince Alexius came up short in their payments to the Crusaders. In a desperate attempt to put together enough money to appease the greedy Crusaders, Isaac and Prince Alexius confiscated sacred gold and silver objects from the city's churches and had them melted down. This sacrilege offended the Byzantines, who formed an opposition movement led by a nobleman named Alexius.
- As tension increased, various factions rioted, and another fire destroyed a huge swath of the city. The elderly Isaac died in January of 1204. That same month, the opposition leader Alexius staged an uprising against Prince Alexius. The young man was thrown in prison and, a week later, was murdered. The former nobleman then declared himself emperor.
- This act precipitated open conflict with the Crusaders, who besieged the city for a second time. The breakthrough into the city came when a valiant pair of brothers crawled through a narrow hole in a gateway. The new emperor Alexius tried to rally his troops, but when this failed, like Alexius III, he fled the city, abandoning his people.

## Aftermath of the Fourth Crusade

- The victorious Crusaders savagely ransacked the city for three days, killing, raping, and looting. Most of the Crusaders then simply went home, although a few continued on to the Holy Lands. Pope Innocent was appalled by these further shameful deeds of Crusaders, but when offered a share of the relics stolen from Constantinople, he accepted it.
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- In the vicious sack of Constantinople, many of the city's fabulous treasures and artworks were either stolen or destroyed.**
- Although the Byzantine Empire continued for several centuries more, it was left in a weakened and disorganized condition. This may have contributed to its final defeat at the hands of the Ottoman Turks, who captured Constantinople in 1453.
  - The story of the Fourth Crusade provides a cautionary example of unintended consequences and the ease with which temptations and human frailties can cause even the most well-meant plans to go astray.
    - Pope Innocent III initiated the Crusade with the goals of capturing the Holy Lands and enhancing his reputation, but his followers ended up rampaging through Christendom and leaving behind one of the blackest legacies of any military expedition.
    - Perhaps even worse, by sacking Constantinople, the Crusaders effectively betrayed the fortress that had protected the borders of Europe for centuries.

## Suggested Reading

Andrea, *Contemporary Sources for the Fourth Crusade*.

Philips, *The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople*.

## Questions to Consider

1. The Fourth Crusade offers an example of unintended consequences—Pope Innocent called it for one purpose, but it ended up doing something very different. Could this have been avoided and how?
2. It is easy to condemn the figures of the Fourth Crusade as immoral and bad, but try to consider the campaign from their perspectives. Could they have been good men who made bad decisions?

# Kalka River: Genghis Khan's General—1223

## Lecture 7

In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, a new group made a dramatic appearance on the stage of world history. These were the Mongols, who would burst forth from central Asia and carve out the largest land empire the world has ever seen. One of the most impressive Mongol victories came in 1223 at the Battle of the Kalka River in Russia. There, a powerful coalition of Russian and Kipchak rulers had their entire armies wiped out by a smaller force of Mongols. This battle exemplifies both the fatal danger of underestimating one's opponent and the ability of a clever and observant general to manipulate his enemies to his advantage.

### Subotai and Genghis Khan

- The man who welded together the previously separate Mongol tribes and set them on their path of conquest was Temujin, later known as Genghis Khan. His military was a meritocracy, in which men achieved rank based on their abilities. One of those who benefitted from this system was the general who would lead the Mongols to victory at the Battle of Kalka River, a man known today as Subotai.
- Subotai was not a Mongol but came from a tribe that lived in the forests to the north of Mongolia. When he was 14 years old, he left home and became one of Temujin's followers. He later became one of Genghis Khan's most trusted military strategists and generals.
- The events that led to the Battle of Kalka River began with Genghis Khan's campaign against the Khwarazmian Empire, which stretched from the Caspian Sea to Afghanistan. By 1220, this once-mighty empire had been destroyed by the great khan. Incorporating this kingdom brought the ever-expanding borders of the Mongol Empire to the fringes of the Mediterranean and European worlds.
- As always, Subotai was concerned with acquiring intelligence on the peoples that the Mongols might encounter as they moved into

new areas. Accordingly, he proposed to Genghis Khan that he would lead a reconnaissance raid of gigantic scale: circling the entire Caspian Sea. In the fall of 1220, with an army probably numbering around 25,000, Subotai set off on his mission.

- Thus began what has been labeled the greatest cavalry raid in history. By the time Subotai returned, three years had elapsed, Subotai and his men had ridden more than 5,000 miles, and they had fought and won five major battles.



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**The Mongols who fought under Genghis Khan were known as the fiercest warriors and the best horsemen of the age, rapidly traversing vast distances on their small, tough steppe ponies.**

### **Early Campaign in the Caucasus**

- Subotai's reconnaissance would be the first time the Mongols had ventured into the west. As the men moved up the western shore of the Caspian Sea in early 1221, their first challenge was to find a way through the Caucasus Mountains. This region was the territory of the kingdom of Georgia, which possessed a large and well-equipped army.
- The king of Georgia led his army to oppose the Mongols, and the First Battle of the Kura Plain ensued.
  - When the heavily armed Georgians charged forward, the Mongols practiced their standard tactic of feigning retreat while showering their pursuers with arrows. The usual effect of this was that the attacking troops became strung out and their formation lost coherence. Once this had happened, the Mongols would swing around and counterattack.
  - At Kura Plain, this is exactly what happened, and the Georgians, who thought they were chasing a defeated foe,

suddenly found themselves assaulted from all sides. They were routed and suffered heavy casualties as they fled the field.

- Then, as winter approached, Subotai led his men forward, probing toward the passes through the Caucasus. The king of Georgia again summoned his army and intercepted the Mongols in the foothills. Once more, the Mongols steadily gave ground before the advancing Georgian knights, until the Georgians had been drawn into a position where they could be pinned against the hills.
  - This was the moment Subotai had been waiting for, and the regiment that he had been holding in reserve now smashed into the flank of the Georgian army. When the Georgians turned to face this new threat, Subotai's center troops curtailed their retreat, spinning around and assaulting the newly exposed side of the Georgian formation.
  - Hammered from two directions, the Georgians crumbled and were massacred. Nearly the entire force, including the king himself, was slaughtered.
- These early victories would have important consequences for the rest of the campaign. First, they opened up a pathway to Europe. Second, they enabled the Mongols to outfit themselves with high-quality equipment stripped off the slain Georgians. Finally, they sparked the hostility of the Kipchaks, some of whom had served in the Georgian army.
- Subotai next effected an unprecedented winter crossing of the icy Caucasus; probably fewer than 20,000 Mongols survived this ordeal and reached the other side. As the Mongols struggled down through the last valley leading out of the mountains, they encountered their worst fear: a hostile and well-rested army more than twice their size. This force was a mixture of local tribes, plus Alans and the vengeful Kipchaks.
- Mongols preferred to fight battles of maneuver on flat ground, where they could use their advantages in speed and mobility. Now,



however, they were trapped in a narrow pass, facing a superior foe and with no room to employ their usual hit-and-run tactics. Subotai attempted a desperate frontal assault, but it was thrown back by the solid mass of men blocking the entrance to the pass. The allies then settled down to wait.

- In this situation, Subotai revealed his true genius as a strategist. Rather than sacrificing his men in additional frontal attacks, he used cunning to weaken his enemies. He secretly sent bribes to the Kipchaks and appealed to them as fellow raiders of the steppe. This ploy worked, and in the middle of the night, the Kipchaks abandoned their allies and retreated. Subotai immediately pounced on the remaining forces and destroyed them. Then, the Mongols sped after the Kipchaks and massacred most of them, as well.
- Subotai had broken onto the flat Russian steppe, and the path toward the several Russian and Kipchak principalities that lay to the west was clear. As the Mongols settled down for the winter, the surviving Kipchaks fled to these western kingdoms and began urging them to unite to face the Mongol threat. Their pleas were successful, and a powerful coalition took shape, including contingents from Galicia, Kiev, Chernigov, and elsewhere.

### **Attack at Kalka River**

- The Mongols advanced westward past the Crimea toward the Dnieper River. Again seeking to divide his enemies, Subotai sent ambassadors to the Russians stating that the Mongols had no plans to attack Russian territory. The Russians, however, remained loyal to the Kipchaks and executed the Mongol ambassadors. The Mongols then sent a formal declaration of war to the Russians.
- By now, an army of perhaps 80,000 Russians and Kipchaks had assembled on the western bank of the Dnieper. Subotai's plan was to fall back from the river, luring the allied army onto the steppes and separating the contingents so that they could be dealt with individually. The Galicians crossed the river first, defeating a small Mongol rearguard left behind by Subotai.

- However, when the Galicians advanced, the Mongols on the other side of the river simply disappeared into the steppe. For nine days, the Mongols retreated just ahead of the allies, occasionally launching arrow attacks but running away when the less mobile allied troops tried to engage them. The Russians, who believed that they were winning these encounters, marched on confidently.
- After falling back more than 100 miles, Subotai finally brought his army to a stop just across the small Kalka River. He stationed a group of light cavalry skirmishers on the western side of this stream and drew up the majority of his forces on the eastern side. On May 31, 1223, the advancing Kipchaks ran into the skirmishers, and the battle began. The Mongols retreated over the river, drawing the pursuing Kipchaks with them. The Russian contingents followed more slowly, while those from Kiev remained some ways behind on the western bank.
- Subotai now sent in his heavy cavalry for the main attack. These men stormed forward and cut through the unprepared ranks of the Kipchaks. Meanwhile, on the sides, the horse archers swarmed around the leading Russian elements. Fresh from routing the Kipchaks, the Mongol cavalry plunged on to engage the leading Russians. With most of their leaders slain, the surviving Russians broke and fell back toward the Kalka.
- As they fled, they ran into the Galician forces. The leader of the Galicians tried to array his men for battle but was hindered by the stream of refugees. The Galicians fought against the Mongols as best they could but, just like the previous groups, soon found themselves beset on three sides and were forced back.
- At the river, the next Russian regiment, the army from Chernigov, was in the process of crossing. With their army divided, the Chernigovians were routed in turn. The entire disorganized mass of running Russians stumbled back across the Kalka and continued their flight westward.

- The only remaining intact division was the slow-moving Kievans, who had drawn their baggage carts in a defensive circle to form a makeshift fort. This became somewhat of a rallying point, in which some of the Russian refugees and noblemen sheltered. The rest of the defeated Russian contingents fled separately. The Mongols also split up, sending groups to try to wipe out the Russians.
- The remnants of the Galicians eventually reached the Dnieper, where they jumped into boats and escaped downriver. The Chernigovians were caught on the steppe, and most were killed, including their prince. Meanwhile, the army of Kiev began creeping backward across the steppe behind its fortress of baggage carts. They managed to hold out for three days of constant attacks from the Mongols before surrendering. Altogether, more than 40,000 Russians were slain at the Kalka River, including 6 princes and 70 noblemen.

### **Legacy of Subotai**

- After Kalka River, all of Russia and the gateway to Europe were open to Mongol invasion. Subotai, however, headed back eastward to complete his reconnaissance mission. Eventually, he completed his circuit of the Caspian Sea and returned to Genghis Khan, fighting several more major battles along the way.
- Subotai faithfully served Genghis Khan and his son, Ogedai Khan, in more campaigns. Finally, at the age of 68, the elderly warrior retired and died five years later. During his career, he was said to have conquered 32 nations and won 65 major battles.
- Throughout the campaign, the allied army had underestimated the abilities of the Mongols. Even worse, they had repeatedly permitted Subotai to maneuver them onto ground of his own choosing and allowed themselves to be separated. Had they kept together and coordinated their movements, they should have been able to overwhelm the Mongols. Instead, they were defeated one by one.

## Suggested Reading

Gabriel, *Genghis Khan's Greatest General*.

May, *The Mongol Art of War*.

Nicolle and Shpakovsky, *Kalka River, 1223*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What are some advantages and disadvantages to the Mongol style of warfare emphasizing feigned retreats and hit-and-run tactics?
2. Was the Mongols' unusual execution of the Russian prisoners justified by the murder of their ambassadors? Are there rules in war?

# Courtrai: Knights versus Shopkeepers—1302

## Lecture 8

For hundreds of years, the knight ruled the battlefields of medieval Europe. In 1302, at the Battle of Courtrai, however, an army composed of the finest knights in Europe—experienced and professional warriors equipped with the best available arms and armor—was soundly beaten by what many viewed as an undisciplined rabble of shopkeepers bearing improvised weapons. How did such an unlikely event come to happen? The answer has to do with broader social and economic changes underway in the late Middle Ages that would render the entire system of feudalism, of which knights were a key part, obsolete.

### Social Hierarchy in the Middle Ages

- During the Middle Ages, horsemen increasingly came to be regarded as the decisive factor in warfare. By the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the figure of the knight—a highly trained warrior mounted on a huge warhorse and encased in heavy armor—had emerged as the ultimate force on the battlefield.
- Conventional wisdom during the Middle Ages dictated that the army with the most knights would win, but knights were horrifically expensive. It has been estimated that obtaining all the equipment and horses for just a single knight amounted to several



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During the Middle Ages, a formation of knights thundering toward an enemy with lowered spears—literally shaking the ground—was a terrifying sight, and many who witnessed it simply turned and fled.

thousand times the annual wage of a skilled craftsman. Of course, maintaining the knight, along with his entourage of assistants, would be a substantial additional expense.

- Not surprisingly, only the very wealthiest could afford to be knights, and knighthood itself soon became associated with the uppermost social stratum of landowning noblemen.
  - Under the feudal system, kings divided up their lands among great lords, who in turn, allocated sections to lesser noblemen. Each level was obligated to fight as knights for the one above it. At the bottom of the social pyramid, and making up the majority of it, were masses of oppressed peasants working the land.
  - All power and wealth were concentrated in the hands of the hereditary nobility. The primacy of knights on the battlefield helped reinforce this social and economic system.
- In the late Middle Ages, a new element emerged on the scene. Towns filled with specialist craftsmen and merchants began to appear as separate entities that did not fit neatly into feudalism, which was based on land ownership. The new class of craftsmen challenged the system because they had money and, hence, at least some influence, but they were not of noble rank.
  - Led by the craftsmen's guilds, some towns used their economic clout to wrest away a degree of independence from the aristocracy.
  - Along with their enhanced status, these townspeople began to develop a sense of communal identity and pride, and they often resented the traditional dominance of the landed nobility.

### **Uprising in Flanders**

- By 1300, one of the richest and most urbanized areas of Europe was Flanders, equivalent today to parts of France, the Netherlands, and Belgium.

- The king of France had recently evicted the count of Flanders, occupied the region with soldiers, and now considered it part of his domain.
- Although some favored the king, strong factions within the wealthy towns of Flanders, such as Bruges and Ghent, were striving to carve out autonomy from both count and king.
- Over the next two years, a series of escalating incidents took place as the pro-French and pro-Flemish factions within the towns jockeyed for power.
  - Matters came to a head on May 18, 1302, when the heavy-handed tactics of the French governor of Flanders united most of the townspeople of Bruges against the French, and there was an uprising.
  - Starting just before dawn, and with members of the butchers' and weavers' guilds taking the lead, the people of the city rioted, killing any Frenchmen or French sympathizers they could find. Over the course of the day, somewhere between several hundred and several thousand people were killed.
- This uprising, known as the Matins of Bruges, represented a point of no return for the Flemish, who realized that the French king's response would be a swift and violent one.
  - In this situation, they recognized that their only hope of survival was to cooperate. Thus, they formed a somewhat odd alliance composed of various factions of townspeople, again, led by the guilds, and the noble offspring of the former count.
  - One of these noblemen, named William of Gulik, was a grandson of the exiled count, and he now arrived in Bruges accompanied by a contingent of mercenaries.
- Although they were not professional soldiers, many of the townspeople had some military experience in city militias. The most common weapon wielded by these militiamen was the pike.

Another weapon that was unique to Flanders was a device called a *goedendag*. This crude but effective weapon could be used as both a club and a spear.

### Opponents at Courtrai

- The man selected by the king of France to lead the punitive expedition to Flanders was Robert II of Artois. Less than two months after the massacre at Bruges, Robert set out to subdue Flanders at the head of an army probably made up of more than 2,500 mounted knights and 5,000 to 7,500 other warriors.
- Opposing them was a motley collection of groups who had banded together to defend against the French, including guildsmen, the militia of Bruges, men from surrounding territories and eastern Flanders, and some Flemish nobles who supported the rebellion. Among the nobles were 50 or 60 who might be classified as knights.
- The two armies were roughly equal in total numbers, but the French forces were all professional soldiers and included thousands of mounted men, versus the Flemish, who were overwhelmingly amateurs and were all on foot.
- The town of Courtrai, located about 24 miles south of Bruges, was a strategic point controlling access from France to Flanders. Recognizing its importance, the combined Flemish army marched there. Courtrai, however, was held by a small French garrison, which was besieged by the Flemish army. Soon, the army led by Robert of Artois also arrived at Courtrai, and after facing off for a few days, the two sides prepared for combat. The day of the battle would be July 11, 1302.

### Battle of the Golden Spurs

- The Flemish forces were drawn up with their backs to the walls of Courtrai and a nearby river and with a large field between them and the French army. The terrain would be ill-suited to the charging horsemen of the French, but the Flemish had backed themselves



into a position from which there could be no retreat. They had to win, or they would all be killed.

- The Bruges contingent held the right side of their line, with the men from the surrounding regions in the center and the group from eastern Flanders on the left.
- William of Gulik, along with one of the sons of the count, sent their horses away and took up positions in the front rank, holding pikes. Although noblemen, in the coming battle, they would fight side by side with the townspeople and commoners.
- Across the field, the French had held a council of war, during which the commander of the crossbowmen advised pelting the Flemish army with crossbow bolts, then sending in the foot soldiers to finish them off. The knights bristled at this suggestion because it would deprive them of the honor of being the ones to defeat the enemy. Thus, it was decided that the crossbowmen would shoot to soften up the enemy, and the knights would then charge forward to crush them and win the battle.
- The French knights were assembled into three large groups matching the ones in the Flemish army. The fight began with the French crossbowmen unleashing a rain of bolts. The Flemish crossbowmen, who were stationed in front of the main line, replied with shots of their own.
  - The French, who were more numerous and were supported by infantry, drove back the Flemish crossbowmen, who took shelter behind the main line.
  - The French crossbowmen and foot soldiers were eager to press their advantage and might have done so to good effect, but Robert, fearing that they might defeat the Flemish on their own, ordered them back to make way for his knights.
- The battalions of knights ponderously began to move forward but could not build momentum on the swampy ground. After awkwardly picking their way across the streams, they continued

on toward the Flemish line, which bristled with lowered pikes. The militiamen watched as the deadly knights thundered confidently toward them.

- Along most of the line, the townspeople held firm, jabbing with their pikes and, when the opportunity presented itself, bringing their iron-rimmed *goedendags* crashing down on the exposed heads of unhorsed knights.
- On the two sides, the Flemish line managed to blunt the onslaught, but in the center, French knights cut their way into the Flemish formation and threatened to break through. Seeing this, the commander of the Flemish reserves brought up his troops to bolster the line. Knots of militia clustered around each knight, hacking and poking with their weapons until he fell from the saddle, then pounding on the fallen man until someone managed to insert a blade or point into a weak spot in the armor.
- The French charge faltered, then began to retreat. Preferring death on the battlefield to the disgrace of losing, Robert ordered the trumpets to sound the charge and led his personal contingent of knights into the thickest part of the battle. Successful at first, he was ultimately surrounded and mobbed. With the Flemish soldiers closing in on him, he begged that his beloved war horse be spared, but filled with rage, the Flemish troops killed both of them.
- After three hours of intense combat, the battle finally wound down, an utter disaster for the French. Thousands of France's best warriors lay dead on the bloody field. In the aftermath of the battle, the golden spurs worn by 500 of the fallen knights were collected and mounted on the walls of a nearby church. Because of this, the battle has become popularly known as the Battle of the Golden Spurs.

### The End of Knightly Dominance

- The Battle of Courtrai halted French attempts to seize the region and made possible the eventual creation of the Netherlands and Belgium as independent states. The French failed to learn the

military lesson of Courtrai—that the era of knightly dominance was coming to an end—and French knights suffered further humiliating defeats by foot soldiers at such battles as Agincourt during the soon-to-begin Hundred Years’ War with England.

- Courtrai illustrates the now-familiar errors of overconfidence and failure to take the terrain into account, but it also demonstrates the dangers of failing to adapt to change. The French held fixedly to a concept of warfare that had become outdated and paid the ultimate price for their rigid thinking.

### Suggested Reading

Fegley, *The Golden Spurs of Kortrijk*.

Verbruggen, *The Battle of the Golden Spurs*.

### Questions to Consider

1. The Battle of Courtrai has a strong element of class warfare, with the commoner militiamen pitted against the knight noblemen. How much did this element contribute to the actions and decisions of each side?
2. Although the frontal charge of knights over a swampy field might seem foolish, could Robert of Artois have acted differently and still have retained his status and position?

# Nagashino: Taking Swords to a Gunfight—1575

## Lecture 9

In the last lecture, we saw how failure to adapt to change can be a fatal mistake. This theme features in the Battle of Nagashino, as well, but with a twist. Throughout history, a powerful agent of change has been the development of new technologies, especially ones with military applications. Up to now in this course, gunpowder has not played a significant role, but at the Battle of Nagashino in 1575, crude guns were a key factor in one side achieving a crushing victory. It is not, however, a case of one group gaining a new technology that the other lacked: Both of the opposing armies at Nagashino possessed guns, but only one commander used them to maximum effect.

### Oda Nobunaga and the Takeda Clan

- During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Japan was divided into numerous fiefdoms controlled by warlords who fought one another constantly. A shogun supposedly ruled over all of Japan, but he had become a figurehead with little actual power.
- In the latter half of the century, a man named Oda Nobunaga had risen from his original status as a fairly minor lord to control both the shogun and the capital city of Kyoto. His goal was to unify all of Japan.
- One of Oda's greatest rivals was another skilled general, Takeda Shingen, who was the head of the powerful Takeda clan. The Takeda army was renowned for its unusually large and formidable contingent of mounted samurai, who won engagements by fiercely charging the enemy.
- Shingen was viewed as the one man who could stand up to Oda, and he began a series of campaigns against Oda's allies. The most important of these was the Tokugawa clan; accordingly, Shingen began attacking Tokugawa castles. While this conflict was still in its opening stages, however, Shingen died prematurely. With

Shingen's death, control of the Takeda clan passed to his son, Takeda Katsuyori, who soon decided to resume the offensive against Oda and the Tokugawa clan.

### Forces at Nagashino

- On May 30, 1575, Takeda Katsuyori led his army out to invade Tokugawa territory. He had a secret plan to capture the main city of the Tokugawa. Katsuyori had made contact with a disaffected high-ranking official within the Tokugawa administration, who had promised to open the gates of the city to admit the Takeda samurai. As Katsuyori was marching toward the city, however, the plot was uncovered by the Tokugawa, and the traitorous official was executed.
- Katsuyori had no hope of capturing the well-defended city without inside help. Intent on winning glory, however, he was reluctant to simply withdraw back to his own territory. He marched to the coast, burned some small fortified outposts, and attacked one of the Tokugawa castles. At last, Katsuyori came to the castle of Nagashino, a relatively small fortress situated in a strong defensive location.
- Katsuyori's army numbered about 15,000 men. This was almost half the total strength of the Takeda clan. Of the 15,000, more than 4,000 were samurai mounted on horses. Samurai were highly trained and well-armored warriors proficient with many weapons, including the sword and bow. Supplementing the samurai were lower-ranking soldiers



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**The more elaborate suits of armor worn by wealthy or aristocratic samurai were stunning works of art, with hundreds or even thousands of carefully constructed parts and, often, fanciful decorations.**

known as *ashigaru*. Their most common weapon was a long stabbing spear, and they tended to have simpler armor. Recently, some of the *ashigaru* had begun to be equipped with primitive matchlock guns.

- Such guns were a relatively new innovation, having been introduced, probably by Portuguese traders, in the mid-1500s.
- These weapons consisted of a metal barrel mounted on a wooden stock. A ball and gunpowder were loaded down the barrel, and when the gunner wished to fire it, he pressed a trigger device that thrust a burning fuse into the firing pan, igniting some gunpowder, which then set off the main charge. Matchlocks were inaccurate weapons and were simply pointed in the direction of the enemy rather than aimed at specific targets.
- At Nagashino, the Takeda army included about 700 *ashigaru* with matchlocks.
- By mid-June, Katsuyori had deployed his 15,000 men in contingents encircling the castle of Nagashino, and the siege began. The head of the Tokugawa clan, Tokugawa Ieyasu, was determined to come to the aid of his beleaguered castle and gathered together a relief force of 8,000 men—three-quarters of his total army. Oda Nobunaga also mustered a relief column of about 30,000 men.
  - Both Tokugawa and Oda's columns were composed of the usual mix of samurai and *ashigaru*, but Oda's army included 3,500 *ashigaru* bearing matchlocks.
  - Altogether, the combined relief force numbered 38,000 to Katsuyori's 15,000. The wise move would probably have been for Katsuyori to abandon the siege and withdraw, but he was confident that his mounted samurai would provide an edge in battle.
- Meanwhile, in the castle, the defenders were down to only a couple days' worth of supplies, and the constant Takeda attacks were threatening to overrun them. One brave samurai, Torii Sune'emon,

snuck out of the castle, reached the allied commanders, and informed them of the situation. The commanders promised to hurry the relief effort, and Torii managed to deliver the hopeful news to the castle defenders before being crucified by the Takeda.

- Katsuyori now knew that a large enemy army would soon arrive, and he held a council of war to decide on a plan of action. His father's veteran advisors wisely urged withdrawing back to their own territory, but many of the younger lords wanted to stay and fight. Katsuyori sided with them.
  - The older men then said that Katsuyori should quickly storm the castle with an all-out assault so that they could then contend with the larger relief force from behind the barrier of the castle walls.
  - Again, Katsuyori rejected the recommendation and announced that they would attack in the morning.

### **Samurai versus *Ashigaru***

- Meanwhile, the combined armies of Oda and Tokugawa had arrived and encamped for the night at a position about two miles from the castle. Because both commanders were wary of Katsuyori's excellent cavalry, they selected a site that would not allow the Takeda horsemen to build up the full momentum of a cavalry charge. They deployed their soldiers in an undulating line on one side of a field that was crossed by several shallow streams; although small, these streams would be enough to break up a formation of galloping horsemen. Just behind the last of these obstacles, they set up blocks of *ashigaru* armed with matchlocks.
- Oda had recently been on the receiving end of massed matchlock fire when fighting a group of rebels, and this experience had taught him that the optimal way to use these new weapons was to group them together, then fire them all at once in coordinated volleys.
  - The problem with such a strategy was that the gunners were extremely vulnerable during the lengthy reloading period. Oda's clever solution was to erect a series of open wooden fences or

palisades in front of the formations of matchlock men. This would prevent them from being run down by cavalry and allow other *ashigaru*, wielding their traditional spears, to poke through the large holes in the palisades to keep attackers at a distance.

- Acknowledging the importance he attached to the matchlock *ashigaru*, Oda assigned his best and most experienced officers to oversee them. This was an interesting decision because the *ashigaru* were regarded as being of much lower status than the elite samurai, but it reflects Oda's innovative personality and ability to think pragmatically rather than being blinded by social conventions.
- Katsuyori's army was arrayed in four divisions, a left, right, center, and reserve, each with a mixture of troop types. Just after 6:00 on the morning of June 28, Takeda ordered the war drums to signal the advance, and his famed cavalry swept forward.
- Held under strict discipline by their officers, the allied matchlock men held their fire until the horsemen had closed to within 50 yards of the palisades. Then, they blazed away, with three ranks of gunners rotating to maximize the volume of shots.
- Combat spread all along the line of the palisades as Takeda horsemen searched for a weak point and hacked at the defenders. Meanwhile, the allied *ashigaru* loaded and fired their guns as fast as possible, while other *ashigaru* poked through the fences with their pikes at the menacing horsemen.
- Although the initial matchlock volleys took a heavy toll, once the Takeda men closed with their enemies, the battle settled down to a long, grueling encounter, with men hacking, stabbing, slashing, and shooting at close range. There may have been several successive charges, and at some point, Katsuyori ordered his reserves and personal bodyguard to advance all along the line and join in the fray. In the end, the battle lasted for eight hours.



- By early afternoon, as the Takeda casualties mounted, it was clear that they had lost the battle, and they began to fall back. Oda ordered his men to pursue, and the Takeda contingents lost cohesion as individual groups and men concentrated on saving themselves. Katsuyori managed to escape, but the battle had been a disaster for the Takeda faction. Out of 15,000 men, 10,000 had been killed. On the other side, the allies suffered 6,000 casualties out of their force of 38,000.

### **The Fate of Katsuyori and Oda**

- After the crushing defeat at Nagashino, Katsuyori retreated back to his own provinces and went into a turtle-like defensive mode. He was able to hang on in this way for another seven years, but with his military reputation in tatters, his allies and retainers began to desert him. In 1582, Oda and Tokugawa again combined to invade, and stronghold after stronghold fell to them. At last, with his army reduced to just 300 men and his enemies closing in, Katsuyori committed suicide.
- Only a few months after finally defeating Katsuyori, Oda himself was assassinated by one of his own generals. The real winner of the entire conflict was Tokugawa Ieyasu, who adeptly moved into the power vacuum and hugely expanded his territory. Having become one of the most powerful men in Japan, he eventually united the country under his sole domination, declaring himself shogun in 1603.
- The Battle of Nagashino had a profound effect on future Japanese warfare. From that point on, it became standard for armies to include large contingents of matchlock-bearing *ashigaru*. As at Nagashino, they were employed in massed blocks firing volleys. Fortifications also took on greater importance after the usefulness of Oda's palisades had been proven.
- Oda's overwhelming victory at Nagashino can be attributed to his ability to embrace a new technology, as well as the flexibility of mind that allowed him to adapt his strategy to take account of that technology's strengths and weaknesses.

## Suggested Reading

Turnbull, *Battles of the Samurai*.

———, *Nagashino, 1575*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What could Katsuyori have done differently to have a better chance of winning the Battle of Nagashino?
2. It often happens that the person or group who benefits from a new technology is not the one who invents it or uses it first but the one who figures out how to employ it effectively. What are some other examples of this from history?

# Cartagena: High Walls, Short Ladders—1741

## Lecture 10

The most spectacular battle in the unusually named War of Jenkins's Ear was a massive amphibious assault that England launched against one of Spain's principal ports in the Americas, the city of Cartagena. Although this expedition began in an atmosphere of great enthusiasm, with the British harboring dreams of possibly pushing Spain out of the New World entirely, it ended in failure, embarrassment, and recriminations. Chief among the reasons for its failure is the enmity that arose between the top-ranking British naval officer and his counterpart in charge of the army component of the expedition. Rather than cooperating, these two leaders often worked at cross purposes, and this inter-service rivalry ultimately doomed the enterprise.

### **Vernon, Wentworth, and de Lezo**

- The admiral who commanded the British naval units during the campaign of Cartagena was Edward Vernon, and the general in charge of the army regiments was Thomas Wentworth.
  - The men who had originally been chosen for these top positions both died before they could carry out their missions. Thus, it was never clear which of the substitutes was intended to be in charge of the expedition, and decisions about the campaign were made by a committee of officers.
  - To make matters worse, Vernon's and Wentworth's personalities clashed, and they developed a dislike bordering on contempt for each other.
- Vernon was a fairly competent admiral. Earlier in his career, he had attacked and captured the Spanish harbor of Porto Bello in Panama. But this had left Vernon with a misleadingly low opinion of Spanish military capabilities and convinced him that a crude frontal assault was all that was needed to defeat the Spanish.

- At Cartagena, however, Vernon and Wentworth would face opposition considerably more determined than the defenders of Porto Bello had been. The Spanish admiral in charge of Cartagena's defense was a man named Blas de Lezo, who had amassed a long record of bravery. He had also lost his left leg, arm, and eye in various combats, but none of these disabilities impaired his continued naval career.

### Forces at Cartagena

- With public enthusiasm for the expedition running high, the British government went all-out in its effort to conquer Cartagena. The navy assigned more than 50 warships to the endeavor, manned by around 15,000 sailors. In addition, the army had contributed more than 100 transport vessels to carry the landing force, which consisted of approximately 10,000 soldiers. Altogether, it was a force of 30,000 soldiers and 200 ships and was one of the largest amphibious expeditions before the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Against this vast force, the defenders of Cartagena seemed badly outmatched. De Lezo had fewer than 3,000 soldiers. So desperate was he for men that a group of 600 local Indians wielding their



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About one-quarter of the total number of British ships of the line was sent to Cartagena—a significant concentration of Britain's available strength.

traditional bows and arrows were pressed into service. One thing Cartagena did have, however, was extensive fortifications.

- Cartagena is located alongside a large lagoon that has a narrow opening to the ocean. The lagoon provides an excellent sheltered harbor, and its entrance was commanded by several forts and gun batteries. The city itself was protected by substantial walls, and the violent surf made landing on the beach impractical. On the high ground around Cartagena were several more fortresses and castles.
- De Lezo, however, lacked sufficient troops to man all these fortifications and had a naval squadron consisting of just six ships of the line and a handful of subsidiary vessels.

### **Siege of Cartagena**

- As the British armada made its way across the Atlantic, the men, crowded together on the transports, were beset by smallpox, dysentery, scurvy, and typhus. During the Atlantic crossing, nearly 500 men died and 1,300 more fell seriously ill. Thus, even before facing the Spanish, more than one-quarter of the army troops were dead or debilitated.
- At last, in early March of 1741, the British arrived off Cartagena. With disease running rampant through the crews, Vernon believed that he did not have enough sailors to properly man his ships; thus, he coopted a large number of the soldiers. This left Wentworth severely short of men to conduct the siege on land, and for the rest of the expedition, there would be heated exchanges between the two commanders. Wentworth desperately begged Vernon to release soldiers for land operations, but Vernon grudgingly doled out only small numbers.
- After assessing the situation, the British decided to first capture the forts guarding the entrance to the lagoon. The largest of these was known as Boca Chica, and to supplement its defenses, de Lezo had drawn up his line of battle ships across the mouth of the channel. Several British warships moved in and began bombarding the forts.

Hundreds of troops were landed, and several minor fortifications were seized. Over the next weeks, the British slowly pushed forward, capturing more forts, ferrying most of the troops ashore, and setting up a camp.

- Throughout the siege, tensions mounted between the two commanders. There were repeated squabbles over manpower, with Wentworth asking for sailors to help construct gun batteries, and Vernon claiming that he could not spare the men. Vernon often sent somewhat insulting messages to Wentworth, offering unwanted advice, accusing him of not moving fast enough in conducting the siege, and implying that the soldiers were lazy. For his part, Wentworth failed to properly assert his authority to get the aid he needed from the navy.
- The standard method of capturing major fortifications at the time was to set up a battery of cannons that would pound the walls until a breach was made; then, troops would dash through and overrun the castle—a slow process, often taking weeks.
  - Vernon, who was impatient with this rate of progress, ordered his ships to sail close to Boca Chica and bombard it, but the only result was that three ships were badly damaged. Finally, the breach was made, the assault went forward, and the fortress fell.
  - De Lezo burned several of his ships, sinking them in the passage to try to block the English from entering. The English, however, managed to establish themselves in the lagoon. Their next challenge was the string of forts surrounding Cartagena.
- When an early attack succeeded in seizing a minor fort, Vernon sent an exuberant dispatch back to England in which he implied that Cartagena was already as good as taken and, of course, claiming most of the credit. Unfortunately, the celebrations of this success were premature. De Lezo was husbanding his resources for a vigorous defense of the city, and it was far from being subjugated. The main fort protecting Cartagena was the castle of San Lazaro, and British efforts now focused on this last, vital defense.

- With supplies running out and the number of healthy soldiers dwindling daily, the British decided not to wait until the cannons made a breach in the enemy walls but to attempt an all-out assault on San Lazaro.

### **Attack on San Lazaro**

- The plan was to launch a surprise attack by night. More than 1,500 men were detailed to go forward in two columns and scale the walls of the fortress using ladders. Some Spanish deserters promised to use their knowledge of the terrain to guide the columns up a gradually sloping section of the approaches to the fort to enable the assault force to reach the walls easily. A variety of special equipment was prepared: ladders to scale the walls, large bundles of wool to fill in ditches, and satchels of grenades to clear the defenders.
- At 3:00 a.m. on April 8, the two columns set off; almost immediately, everything went wrong.
  - The northernmost column, which was intended as a distraction, got lost; the officer in charge was killed; the guide leading the column was killed; the men came under heavy fire from the Spanish fortifications; and a counterattack compelled them to retreat.
  - The main assault in the south fared no better. First, whether deliberately or through incompetence, the Spanish guide led the force up a section of steep, broken ground, which exhausted the men and disrupted the formation. Then, they encountered some outer works and, in the dark, mistook them for the main walls of the fort. The leading soldiers called for the ladders to be brought up, and chaos ensued while those carrying them tried to work their way to the front.
  - After sorting things out a bit, the advance continued toward the now fully alert main fortress, which subjected the British to withering fire.

- The difficulties in reaching the fort had delayed the attack until the sun rose, making the column an even clearer target. Although a number of the officers were lost, the remnants of the column staggered on and reached the main walls.
  - Because most of the wool bundles and grenades had gone astray, when they were now desperately needed, few were available. The soldiers still had some ladders, and these were placed against the walls, only for the men to discover that they were 10 feet too short.
  - At last, the attack fizzled out, and the survivors tried to make their way back to safety. Of the 1,500 men who had made the assault, 600 were casualties.

### **Fate of the Commanders and Lessons Learned**

- By now, battle and illness had reduced the total number of effective British troops to just a few thousand, and Vernon and Wentworth had no choice but to call off the campaign and depart. In the words of one 19<sup>th</sup>-century commentator, “Thus ended a very expensive exercise, which from the beginning was ill-conceived and miserably executed.”
- In coming years, the two rivals and their respective adherents would each write accounts of the disaster that attempted to place the blame on the other. Vernon served for many more years as an officer and a politician, dying at the age of 72. Wentworth likewise had a political career, but he died within a decade. De Lezo died only four months after the defeat of the British expedition, apparently from an infection he caught during the siege.
- Even in a course on military blunders, the story of the attack on Cartagena stands out as an astonishing sequence of errors and stupidity. Above all, Vernon and Wentworth’s failure to cooperate demonstrates the dangers of placing one’s personal feelings above the good of the group, as well as the essential need for teamwork and mutual support when different branches of an armed service are called on to work together.



## Suggested Reading

Harding, *Amphibious Warfare in the Eighteenth Century*.

Richmond, *The Navy in the War of 1739–48*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Which British commander, Vernon or Wentworth, deserves more of the blame for the failure of the expedition to Cartagena and why?
2. How did Vernon's experiences in attacking Porto Bello affect his later strategy at Cartagena, and were the conclusions he drew from Porto Bello reasonable ones?

# Culloden: The Bonnie Prince Blunders—1746

## Lecture 11

**O**n August 3, 1745, Prince Charles Edward Stuart, son of the exiled claimant to the thrones of England and Scotland, landed from a French warship on the western shore of Scotland. His intent was to raise a rebellion, overthrow what he viewed as foreign usurpers, and restore the rule of the house of Stuart over England and Scotland. His arrival initiated a tumultuous period that would include multiple battles and a dramatic invasion of England; finally, nine months after the prince's landing, the campaign would culminate with the Battle of Culloden. There, on a bleak patch of Scottish moor, the fate and future of the prince, as well as of England and Scotland, would be determined.

### Prince Charles and William Augustus

- The seeds of Culloden had been sown some 58 years earlier when the Catholic King James II of the house of Stuart was deposed as king of England and Scotland. The throne was eventually filled by a new king belonging to the house of Hanover from Germany, George I.
- The deposed Catholic king, James II, lived out the rest of his life in exile, but factions in England and Scotland, termed Jacobites, cherished hopes of his restoration. When James II died, his son James Francis Stuart became the new heir-in-absentia. His son, in turn, was Prince Charles Stuart—the one who led the attempt to recapture the throne that would end at the Battle of Culloden.
- Prince Charles had grown to adulthood pursuing the lifestyle of the idle rich, devoting a great deal of time to hunting, and developing an excessive fondness for alcohol. His one driving passion was a feeling of deep resentment that his family had been denied its inheritance, and he believed that he was the man to gain it back.
  - Good-looking and charismatic, Charles radiated confidence in himself and dedication to his cause. Unfortunately, he appears to have had little or no sense of strategic or tactical vision.

In battle, he seemed to freeze and leave everything to his subordinates, rather than exercising decisive command.

- The prince's most important subordinate officer was a Scottish lord named George Murray. He was a decent general but had a prickly personality that created considerable friction with other Jacobite commanders and with the prince.
- The British commander at Culloden was William Augustus, the duke of Cumberland and the second son of the current English king, George II. He had received an excellent education and rose to the rank of general in the British army. Although there is no doubt about his personal bravery, Cumberland's tactical abilities were somewhat unimaginative. He tended to be a bit conservative, but he did not make many serious errors on the battlefield.

### **Lead-Up to Culloden**

- Despite its inauspicious start, the Jacobite rebellion gained considerable momentum, and many highland and lowland clans joined, although others remained loyal to the Hanoverian king. The rebels won several victories and, buoyed by success, launched an invasion of England.
- This seems to have caught the English by surprise. The invaders reached Derby, about 60 miles from London, before fear of the British army being gathered by Cumberland caused them to retreat to Scotland and focus on reducing English strongpoints there. Cumberland eventually pursued them, and the stage was set for a final confrontation.
- This came when Cumberland marched his army from Aberdeen toward Inverness, around which the Jacobite army was operating. In anticipation of battle, Cumberland gave his troops a rest day so that they would be fresh for the conflict. When the Jacobite scouts detected the proximity of the British, a daring plan was devised: The Jacobites would march in the middle of the night to where the British were encamped and launch a surprise assault.

- Predictably, in the dark, chaos reigned, and the march took far longer than anticipated. Even before reaching the jumping-off point, Lord Murray realized that his men would never be able to launch the attack before dawn; thus, he led his division back to the Jacobite camp.
  - Unfortunately, Murray failed to inform the other divisions of his action, and they kept going, only to discover at dawn that they were alone in facing the entire British army. After a bit of further confusion, they, too, withdrew back to their own encampment.
  - The net result of the operation was that the Jacobite army spent a long night plodding back and forth across the landscape for no purpose, leaving them demoralized and exhausted. With the regiments in complete disorder, many men simply threw themselves down on the damp, chilly ground and fell asleep.
- At this moment, word arrived that the well-rested British army was bearing down on the Jacobites; battle was imminent. But many of the Jacobites troops who were still awake had scattered throughout the countryside, foraging for something to eat. With so many men either asleep or dispersed, the Jacobite army was now too small to hold its original battle position. The troops had no choice but to fall back to a secondary position on Culloden Moor.

### **Battle on the Moor**

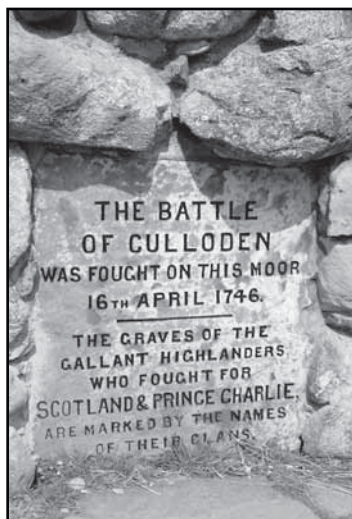
- Under the circumstances, it might have been wise to withdraw even further and defer combat until another time, but Prince Charles was determined to fight. Thus, the groups of clansmen gradually assembled between two sets of stone-walled enclosures on the moor of Culloden. In front of them, between the walls, stretched an open field of wet, boggy ground.
  - The men were drawn up by clan groups, with Murray in charge of the right wing, and the prince situated behind the line roughly in the middle. Fearing that the walls of the stone enclosures would impede the charge of the Highlanders, Murray asked permission to tear some of them down, but the prince refused—a decision that would prove detrimental.

- Altogether, the Jacobites probably numbered around 5,000, although there were hopes that perhaps up to an additional 2,000, who were still asleep or foraging, would eventually arrive and join in.
- On the other side of the moor, the duke of Cumberland arrayed his men in two main battle lines, with the reserves assembled behind these forming a shorter third line. A unit of cavalry was stationed on the left of the British formation, accompanied by a battalion of Highlanders loyal to the royalist cause. Recognizing that they might be able to outflank the Jacobites by sneaking through the enclosures, these men began to tear holes in some of the walls to allow the British cavalry to pass through them. This maneuver would eventually bring them to a position in the rear of the Jacobite line.
- Each side had brought a small number of light cannons, and the battle began with the Jacobite artillerymen opening fire. The British cannons soon replied. According to some newer interpretations of the battle, this cannonade probably lasted only a few minutes, but the British guns were far more effective than their Jacobite counterparts, and the rebel army suffered much heavier casualties.
- The clansmen's usual method of fighting was an enthusiastic charge, in which they dashed forward in a mob, discharged any firearms they had at relatively close range, and closed in to fight hand-to-hand. This style of warfare emphasized individual bravery rather than group coordination and suited the temperament of the Highlanders. After some delay and failed attempts to give the order, at last, the clans received the command to launch their charge.
  - The Jacobites surged forward in a ragged line, clumping together in three groups on the right, left, and center. The heaviest weight of the Jacobite charge was focused on the right side of their line. This made them better targets for British cannon and musket fire, but it also gave the attack on this side of the field greater momentum and strength.

- At the Jacobite left and center, the British volleys, backed up by the bayonets of the redcoats, were successful in repelling the charge, but a frenzied melee took place between clansmen and British soldiers. Clansmen slashed wildly with their long, straight swords, while the redcoats jabbed viciously with their bayonets. So fierce was the assault that the first line of British was pushed backwards, creating a dent in the formation. In some places, the Jacobites broke through and engaged the second line of British troops.
- This was the crisis point of the battle—if the Jacobites could shatter the redcoats here, they might then turn and roll up the entire British line. The British brought up more troops to contain and surround the breakthrough, and this section of the battlefield became a cauldron of death. Lord Murray attempted to push forward some of the Jacobite reserves, but the tide was already turning in favor of the British, and the charge faltered. Rebels began to break away and run back toward their side of the field, pursued by the triumphant British.
- On the Jacobite left, some British cavalry now galloped forward and began to cut down the fleeing rebels. At the same time, the main group of British cavalry on the Jacobite right had infiltrated its way through the enclosures and engaged units of clansmen. From the walls of the enclosure, the British Highlanders had also been able to fire into the flank of the charging clansmen, and they, too, now advanced on the fleeing rebels. The Jacobite army crumbled, and individuals sought to save themselves.
- The British claimed to have found a note during the battle instructing the Jacobite soldiers to give no quarter to any captured British troops, and now, in an infamous episode, they killed most of the wounded Jacobites they encountered, bayoneting them as the clansmen lay helpless on the field. The Jacobites suffered nearly 2,000 casualties versus around 310 for the British.

## The Clearances

- In the aftermath of Culloden, the British were determined to stamp out any trace of rebellion in the highlands of Scotland and embarked on a notorious punitive campaign of oppression, known as the Clearances. Thousands were imprisoned, executed, or deported; farms were demolished, and their tenants were evicted. Garrisons were established, and roads and forts were constructed to facilitate control over the region. The memory of this era and the harshness with which these measures were imposed is still a source of anger and resentment.



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**In the aftermath of the Battle of Culloden, the old way of life centered on the clans in Scotland was destroyed.**

- It is interesting to speculate how subsequent history might have been different if the Jacobites had won Culloden and the Stuarts had been restored, putting a pro-French monarchy in charge of England. At Culloden, however, the Jacobites were outnumbered, exhausted, outgunned, and poorly led. The Jacobite commanders' rivalries and failure to work together, coupled with the prince's poor decisions and waffling, were no match for the discipline, firepower, and professionalism of the British redcoats.

## Suggested Reading

Black, *Culloden and the '45*.

Reid, *Culloden Moor, 1746*.

Sadler, *Culloden*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Prince Charles had the outward appearance of a leader but not the necessary intellectual skills. How significant is each aspect to success?
2. What do you think the Jacobites might have done differently to perhaps change the outcome of Culloden?



# Russia: Napoleon Retreats in the Snow—1812

## Lecture 12

On June 23, 1812, Napoleon Bonaparte crossed the river Niemen and invaded Russia at the head of a vast force numbering nearly 500,000 men. The French Empire stretched from Spain to Poland, and it seemed inevitable that Napoleon would add Russia to his long list of conquests. In just six months, however, this seemingly invincible army would be completely shattered. Of the half million soldiers who confidently marched into Russia on that sunny June day, more than 90 percent would be lost to death, wounds, or capture. The disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812 initiated Napoleon's decline—a process that would culminate a few years later on the battlefields of Leipzig and Waterloo.

### Napoleon's Designs on Russia

- Starting from relatively humble origins on the island of Corsica, Napoleon Bonaparte had gained a reputation for daring as a young artillery officer. Then, adroitly negotiating the web of revolutionary politics in France, he quickly attained the rank of general and amassed a string of victories. In 1799, he staged a coup and effectively became ruler of France under the title First Consul; in 1804, he was crowned emperor of France.
- By 1810, Napoleon had expanded the territory of France and established himself or his puppets on the thrones of Spain, Italy, Holland, Sweden, Naples, and Bavaria. Austria and Russia had been coerced into signing treaties that made them reluctant allies of France. The only nation that had constantly remained an enemy was England.
- Napoleon's attempt to break England economically through the embargo known as the Continental System was not working and provoked resentment from Russia. He seems to have believed that it was necessary to permanently remove Russia as a potential threat to provide lasting security for his empire. Thus, Napoleon

selected Russia as his next target and began to plan an invasion, although he was well aware of the obstacles presented in conquering Russia: the sheer size of the country and the legendarily harsh Russian winter.

- Nevertheless, Napoleon had faith in his own abilities, as well as in the huge army of seasoned men that he commanded. He intended to beat the Russians quickly, long before the first snows came. His plan was to march rapidly toward Moscow, forcing the main Russian army to confront him. A victory in Moscow would then compel the Russians to surrender. Napoleon believed that if he could inflict a single major defeat on the Russians, they would become utterly demoralized, and all resistance would simply crumble away.
- When making these plans, Napoleon badly misjudged the fundamental nature of the Russians. As they had repeatedly demonstrated over nearly a millennium, they were more than capable of a stubborn and prolonged defense against any foe who invaded the motherland.



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**From early in his career, Napoleon believed that he was a specially chosen agent of fate and had an almost mystical conviction of the inevitability of his own glory.**

### Advance into Russia

- Including the armies stationed in Germany and Poland who were covering his advance, Napoleon had committed close to 700,000 men to the Russian invasion. A key component of the main army was a formidable contingent of experienced cavalry, including a special force of 40,000 cavalymen. Napoleon wanted to use this giant cavalry force as a mobile attacking advance guard, but

grouping so many horses together created a logistical nightmare for feeding the animals; many of the creatures were left severely debilitated after just a few weeks of campaigning.

- As the army marched into Russia, the men, too, began to suffer. There was little water, and the heat of late summer was enervating. The soldiers suffered from dehydration; some were felled by dysentery or simply dropped dead of heatstroke. Before even encountering the Russians, the army was decreasing rapidly.
- Three Russian armies had been stationed along the border, but when the French invaded, rather than standing and giving Napoleon the battle he was seeking, they fell back into the interior of Russia.
  - One of these armies lagged a bit, however, and Napoleon saw a chance to encircle and destroy it. Napoleon gave orders that the southern prong of his army should move quickly to cut off the Russians' retreat.
  - Unfortunately, in an instance of poor decision-making, Napoleon had placed his younger brother, Jerome, in charge of this section of the army. Jerome moved too slowly, allowing the Russians to escape the trap and losing a vital opportunity for the French.
- Napoleon pushed deeper into Russia, capturing huge expanses of territory, winning some skirmishes, and taking possession of large cities, such as Minsk. By late August, he had advanced 300 miles, but the decisive battle he sought still eluded him. Some of his senior advisors began to suggest that he cut his losses and return to Poland, but Napoleon could not admit failure. He was sure that if he threatened Moscow—still some 250 miles away—the Russians would have to face him.
- As it turned out, the czar and others felt that it was shameful to allow the French to continue unopposed. Still, they wanted to compel the French to march as far as possible before engaging them. The Russians selected a strong defensible position near the

village of Borodino, just 70 miles west of Moscow. There, they concentrated their armies and began to build fortifications.

### **Battle at Borodino**

- The numbers of troops committed to battle by the French and Russians at Borodino were roughly equal, with 130,000 to 150,000 on each side. Napoleon atypically chose a clumsy frontal assault on the Russian strongpoints, rejecting suggestions that he outflank the Russians and attack them from behind.
- The result was a day-long slugging match, with the French repeatedly crudely assaulting the Russian fortifications. After a long day of brutal fighting by both sides, the Russians withdrew from the field—a notional victory for the French.
- The losses on both sides at the Battle of Borodino were staggering. The Russians had suffered an estimated 45,000 casualties, including 29 generals, while the French lost around 30,000 men and 48 generals.

### **Retreat from Russia**

- Although the Russian army may have yielded the field of Borodino and retreated yet again, it had not been destroyed, nor had the Russians' will to resist been broken. The Russians now decided that even Moscow could be sacrificed in order to continue the struggle. Accordingly, the Russian armies withdrew to the east of Moscow to regroup and rebuild their strength, abandoning the city to the French.
- In mid-September, Napoleon's army entered Moscow. Yet for all of Napoleon's supposed successes—beating the Russian army in a major battle and capturing the main Russian city—the war dragged on.
  - Confronted with this paradox and perhaps also suffering from health problems, Napoleon was struck with uncharacteristic indecisiveness. He lingered in Moscow, vainly hoping that his occupation of the city would force the Russians to negotiate terms with him, but they refused to even talk.

- In mid-October, Napoleon finally realized that the invasion had failed to achieve its strategic objective and that the priority now was to extract what was left of his army, around 100,000 men.
- The departure was a cheerful affair, with the soldiers happy to be heading home. As the columns plodded west, however, things began to unravel. Colder weather set in, food ran out, the pack animals collapsed and died, and disease ravaged the ranks. Sensing the weakness of the French, the Russians began to harass and raid the retreating columns.
- By mid-November, temperatures had dropped to below zero. Still, the remnants of the French army struggled onward, retracing their steps across Russia. One major barrier remained in their path—the river Berezina. The Russians wanted to wipe out the French and now focused on this river as the place to do so.
  - A Russian army was ordered to dash to the western bank of the Berezina and block the French from crossing. But Napoleon's scouts located a spot where it might be possible to erect temporary bridges, and the French diverted to this site without the Russians detecting them.
  - In a stunning feat of courage and determination, the French engineers labored in the freezing water to quickly build the bridges, and the tattered survivors began to cross. The Russians soon arrived, but a rearguard action held them off long enough for most of the French to scramble over the bridges before they were destroyed.
- The Russians then slacked off in their pursuit, but the French staggered on for another two weeks before they reached their starting point at the Niemen River. Napoleon broke away from his dying army on December 5 to return to Paris. The last weeks of the march were among the worst, with temperatures dipping to  $-25^{\circ}$ , the food completely gone, and the men reduced to shambling, frozen skeletons. Finally, the agony ended on December 14, as the survivors reached the city of Vilna just across the Niemen.

- The roll of combat-ready troops was down to around a mere 10,000. Because many wounded had previously been evacuated and others would recover later, the number of French troops who survived the expedition was likely around 35,000, with perhaps another 50,000 or so allied soldiers eventually countable among the living participants. Nevertheless, around 400,000 members of the French army who had been alive six months earlier were now dead. The Russians lost a similar number, and when civilian casualties are added in, the total price of Napoleon's attempted invasion was more than 1 million human lives.

### **Napoleon's Mistakes**

- In the wake of the invasion, Napoleon somehow managed to assemble an army of nearly 200,000 new recruits, but he could never replace the experienced men lost in the Russian snows. He would continue to fight for another two years, but the tide had irreparably turned, and he was now almost always on the defensive.
- Emboldened by the disaster in Russia, many of Napoleon's former allies broke away and joined a pan-European coalition against him. It was only a matter of time before he was brought down.
- The mistakes that Napoleon made during this campaign were many.
  - The entire expedition was ill-conceived from the start, and his expectations for how the Russians would behave were completely erroneous.
  - He foolishly appointed his inept brother to an important role—a decision that cost him the chance to wipe out a Russian army early on.
  - At Borodino, his frontal assault tactics were unimaginative and resulted in an indecisive bloodbath.
  - Too prideful to admit error, he allowed himself to be lured to Moscow and, once there, lingered far too long, hoping for a

diplomatic victory that it was obvious the Russians would not grant him.

- The invasion of Russia proved to be a fatal miscalculation that not only led to Napoleon's downfall but also blemished his legacy as a brilliant general.

### Suggested Reading

Lieven, *Russia against Napoleon*.

Zamoyski, *1812: Napoleon's Fatal March on Moscow*.

### Questions to Consider

1. To what degree did symbolic or personal reasons and motivations determine Napoleon's actions during this campaign?
2. Sweden in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, France in the 19<sup>th</sup>, and Germany in the 20<sup>th</sup>—each of these countries invaded Russia with disastrous results. Look up summaries of the Swedish and German invasions and consider the similarities and differences with Napoleon's attempt.

# Afghanistan: Khyber Pass Death Trap—1842

## Lecture 13

On January 13, 1842, a sentry at the British fort at Jalalabad sighted a lone rider galloping toward him. The man, who had suffered knife wounds to his head, shoulder, knee, and hand, was a British army doctor named William Brydon, and he brought news of a stunning disaster. The entire British Army of the Indus—16,000 soldiers and camp followers—had been wiped out by Afghan tribesmen. While attempting to retreat through the mountain passes from Kabul to India, the whole force had been either slaughtered or captured, and only Dr. Brydon had managed to evade the Afghan warriors to deliver notice of one of the worst disasters in British military history.

### Situation in Afghanistan

- By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British East India Company controlled much of the lucrative Indian subcontinent and maintained order with what amounted to private armies composed mainly of native troops commanded by British officers. At the same time, Russia was aggressively pushing into central Asia, and one of the perennial worries of the British was that the Russians would either attempt to invade India through Afghanistan or foment rebellion against the English.
- In October of 1837, a chance encounter on a mountain road near the border of Iran and Afghanistan seemed to confirm the worst fears of the British. A lieutenant named Rawlinson happened to pass by a small band of horsemen heading toward Afghanistan. Rawlinson recognized the other riders as Cossacks, and in their midst was a Russian political officer. When questioned, the Russian pretended not to understand Rawlinson very well but admitted that he was an official representative bearing gifts for the shah of Persia.
- Rawlinson immediately went to the camp of the shah and learned that the Russian, whose name was Vitkevitch, had been sent to



open negotiations with the ruler of Afghanistan. Realizing that Vitkevitch's mission could be the first step in the long-feared Russian campaign to move into Afghanistan, Rawlinson returned to Tehran and announced to his superiors that the Russians were dispatching agents into Afghanistan to suborn local leaders.

- The current king of Afghanistan was Dost Mohammad Khan. He had deposed the previous ruler, Shah Shoja, in 1834. The British counterpart in Afghanistan to Vitkevitch was a man named Alexander Burnes, and he was ordered to sound out Dost Mohammad.
- Dost Mohammad seems to have been a British sympathizer. He was also a capable ruler, was well-liked by the Afghans, and had the enthusiastic recommendation of Burnes. It should have been a simple matter for the British to extend friendship to him and, thereby, easily secure the frontier against Russia.
- But in Calcutta, Burnes's superior, the governor general of India, Lord Auckland, had his own ideas about who should occupy the throne of Afghanistan. Auckland's political secretary, William Macnaghten, urged him to give British support to the former shah. Auckland acquiesced, and the British in India began to organize a campaign to depose Dost Mohammad and replace him with Shah Shoja.
- The plan was pure folly, but to Burnes's horror, Dost Mohammad was denounced by the British, and a British army of 20,000 men was organized and dispatched to remove him and put Shah Shoja on the throne. Macnaghten accompanied the force as political advisor. By the end of August 1839, this army had marched to Kabul, Dost Mohammad had fled, and Shah Shoja was proclaimed king of Afghanistan.
- The Afghans were not pleased with their new monarch or with the foreign force that had installed him. Most of the British troops went back to India, leaving a garrison of about 5,000 in Kabul.
  - Rather than establishing themselves in one of the available fortresses located around Kabul, the commanders of the British

garrison set up a sprawling camp on the outskirts of the city in the middle of an open plain.

- With a perimeter almost two miles long, overlooked by higher ground, and having only low walls for defense, it was a position that was almost impossible to defend. The food stores for the men were then placed in buildings outside the main camp.
- For a while, things seemed calm, but then, one of Dost Mohammad's sons, Akbar Khan, began to agitate for an uprising against the British and Shah Shuja. Young and charismatic, Akbar Khan rapidly gained supporters, particularly among the warlike tribesmen of the hills.
- Around this time, a new officer, Lord William Elphinstone, was put in charge of the Kabul garrison. Elphinstone was almost entirely crippled by gout and would prove to be completely indecisive and ineffectual as a commander.
- Lieutenant Rawlinson and other experienced men repeatedly submitted reports that a rebellion was imminent, but Macnaghten steadfastly refused to believe them. In late 1841, Auckland ordered that the relatively modest subsidies—basically bribes—that were being paid to the local chieftains should be slashed; this misguided economizing measure removed the last incentive restraining the tribesmen.

### **Confrontation in Kabul**

- On November 1, prompted by an incident involving a local girl, a small mob gathered outside Burnes's house and attacked it. Word of this reached the main British camp, and a number of officers argued that troops should be sent immediately to rescue Burnes and quell the riot. Elphinstone dithered for a while and ultimately did nothing.
- Burnes had about a dozen soldiers in his house, and as the crowd grew larger and more violent, they resisted. A firefight broke out,

and the attackers grew bolder, eventually storming the house and slaughtering the inhabitants, including Burnes.

- The shooting was clearly audible from the camp, but the 5,000 troops there sat idle while Burnes and his party were killed. Now there was a full-fledged uprising, with thousands joining in. Elphinstone decided to wait until the next morning before taking any action. By then, an estimated 50,000 had joined the rebellion.
- Over the next several days, the rebels captured other British outposts, including those containing the food and water stores—a stash that could have fed the army for three years. Within the camp, however, there was only two days' worth of supplies. The Afghans surrounded the camp and, from the high ground overlooking it, began sniping at the now-starving British soldiers.
- Finally, the British attempted a foray out of camp to drive the Afghans from the high ground, but it ended with more than 300 men killed and nothing accomplished. Soon after, Akbar Khan arrived to take command of the rebels; he tightened the siege on the camp.
  - The British now decided that their only hope was to arrange with Akbar Khan to let them withdraw from Kabul and go back to India. A meeting was set up between Akbar and Macnaghten at which Akbar promised to allow the British to retreat unharmed through the Khyber passes and to provide them with food and an escort. In return, Dost Mohammad would be released to reclaim the throne.
  - Macnaghten tried to cut a secret deal with Akbar to betray some of the other warlords, but Akbar revealed this duplicity to his fellow chiefs. At another meeting to supposedly work out the details, Akbar's men seized Macnaghten, a scuffle broke out, and he and the other Englishmen were killed. Once again, the British made no attempt to avenge their slain officers.

## Retreat from Afghanistan

- On January 6, 1842, with snow a foot deep on the ground, the British departed. There were about 3,800 Indian troops, 700 European soldiers, and 12,000 to 14,000 camp followers. The escort that Akbar Khan had promised to ensure their safe passage was nowhere to be found. They had about 90 miles to travel to reach the British fort at Jalalabad.
- Shortly after leaving, Elphinstone ordered a halt, then couldn't decide whether or not to continue. Tribesmen began to snipe at the column, and most of the cannons, as well as the meager supplies, were abandoned in the resulting panic. Night fell, bringing with it freezing temperatures. The column had covered just 5 of the 90 miles.
- The next morning, the column crawled forward again under a constant hail of fire. Elphinstone called another halt at the entrance to Khord Pass. Akbar Khan sent a message saying that if the British would provide him with hostages, he would arrange for them to get through the pass safely. Astonishingly, Elphinstone accepted the offer at face value.
- Pushing on, the survivors finally reached the pass, only to find that Akbar Khan had delayed them so that hordes of tribesmen could gather in the narrow confines of the pass and subject the column to withering fire. Crammed together, the British and their followers were mown down; 3,000 were killed.
- The survivors set off again the next morning, but after only a mile, Elphinstone halted again. This time, many ignored him. The remaining wives and children of the officers were turned over to the mercy of Akbar Khan. The number of soldiers was probably fewer than 1,000 by this point, and safety was still 70 miles distant.
- By January 11, only about 2,000 remained of the 17,000 who had originally set out. Akbar Khan sent another message, claiming that

he wished to meet with Elphinstone and the other senior officers. The British agreed, but once they arrived in Akbar's camp, they were taken hostage.

- Those left behind attempted a night march to escape but ran into a thorny barrier erected across their path. In the dark, only a few made it over the thorn wall, while the rest were massacred. A contingent of about 65 men tried to make a last stand on a hilltop near Gandamak; all but a few were killed. A small party of horsemen also broke free, including Dr. Brydon. In a series of skirmishes, all his companions were slain or captured, until he alone made it to the fort at Jalalabad.

### **British Bungling**

- From start to finish, what is now termed by the British the First Afghan War had been an unmitigated disaster: The paranoia about Russian plots was probably unfounded, Auckland's decision to depose Dost Mohammad was wrong, Elphinstone's indecisiveness was crippling, the lack of a swift response to Burnes's death doomed the British, the degree of gullibility of the British when negotiating with Akbar Khan was stunning, and the retreat itself was horribly mismanaged.
- Elphinstone died while still a prisoner of Akbar Khan. The British officers' wives were treated courteously by Akbar and were eventually released. Akbar Khan himself lived only a few more years, dying in his late 20s. Dost Mohammad not only regained his throne and ruled until 1863 but expanded his empire, all the while maintaining good relations with the British, as he had initially desired. He was buried in a marble tomb, and his descendants continued to rule in Afghanistan until the 1970s.

## Suggested Reading

Dalrymple, *Return of a King*.

Hopkirk, *The Great Game*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Who deserves more of the blame for the disaster in Kabul and why: Auckland, Macnaghten, Elphinstone, Burnes, or someone else?
2. Alexander the Great in antiquity, the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Russians in the 1980s, and the United States more recently have all invaded Afghanistan and experienced similar difficulties in subduing the tribal clans and maintaining order. What makes this country so hard to occupy, and is this a case of history repeating itself multiple times?

# Crimea: Charge of the Light Brigade—1854

## Lecture 14

The Crimean War (1853–1856), fought between Russia and a coalition consisting of England, France, and Turkey, has lapsed into relative obscurity today, but it introduced a number of technological innovations that were to play important roles in later, better-known conflicts, such as the American Civil War and World War I. Despite that, probably the single most famous aspect of the war is a minor incident that has gained a reputation as simultaneously one of the most glorious moments in the history of warfare and one of the greatest military blunders of all time. This was the charge of the Light Brigade, the concluding episode in a day's worth of encounters collectively known as the Battle of Balaclava.

### Background to the Crimean War

- The immediate cause of the Crimean War was a bizarre international squabble over who controlled the keys to the main door in the Church of the Nativity in Jerusalem, Greek Orthodox or Catholic monks.
  - The emperor of France insisted that the Catholic monks be given the keys, while the czar of Russia maintained that only the Orthodox monks should hold them. The Ottoman sultan eventually yielded to the French demands, thereby enraging the Russians.
  - Tensions escalated, leading to a military clash between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, and war was declared. France joined in on the side of the Turks, and bound by a treaty, the British were compelled to come to the defense of the Ottomans, as well.
  - The underlying roots of this war were the declining power of the Ottoman Empire and the chief European nations' desire to prevent their rivals from benefitting or gaining key territory from the anticipated breakup of the ailing empire.

- It had been a longstanding ambition of the Russians to extend their naval power into the Mediterranean from their bases in the Crimean Peninsula—a development feared by the French and British. Accordingly, the allies decided to direct their efforts toward neutralizing the main Crimean Russian naval base at Sevastopol. A large expeditionary force of French and British soldiers was landed in the Crimea, several battles were fought, and Sevastopol was besieged. But the whole endeavor was poorly planned and executed. Supplies were inadequate, and disease ran rampant through the ranks.
- As part of this campaign, on October 25, 1854, the Battle of Balaclava was fought. It unfolded in several stages, the last of which would be the charge of the Light Brigade.
  - It began with an attack by the Russians against some fortified redoubts containing Turkish troops and a few cannons. The row of redoubts guarded the British supply lines, and the goal of the Russian attack was to cut the British off from their supply depot.
  - The assault began well for the Russians, who overran a number of the redoubts. The overall attack, however, was subsequently blunted and stopped. In a celebrated incident, a line of British Highlanders fended off a Russian charge. Then, a bold uphill counterattack by the British brigade of heavy cavalry halted another major Russian advance.
- Many of the subsequent events hinged on the personalities of the key British commanders. These included Lord Raglan, the commander in chief, who observed the battle from a rocky outcrop that rose nearly 700 feet above the level of the surrounding valleys. The Crimean War would be the first time that Raglan would directly oversee actual combat operations.
  - The man in overall charge of the British cavalry forces, which consisted of a Heavy Brigade and a Light Brigade, was the earl of Lucan.



- Lucan's subordinate and the commander of the Light Brigade was the earl of Cardigan, an arrogant aristocrat. Lucan and Cardigan thoroughly despised each other.

### **The Battle of Balaclava**

- The captured redoubts were located on a ridge known as the Causeway Heights, which separated two valleys, one to the north and one to the south. The Russians had fortified the sides of the north valley with batteries of cannon; another line of cannons was positioned across the far end of this valley.
- On his hilltop, Raglan was annoyed by the Russian successes in overrunning the redoubts and wanted to counterattack, but the only available troops were the Light and Heavy Brigades. There was no infantry to support these cavalry troops, but Raglan ultimately ordered the cavalry to attempt to drive the Russians from the Causeway Heights and the captured redoubts. This was not an entirely unreasonable goal, and against such scattered infantry targets, the cavalry could expect success.
- Raglan sent an order to Lucan that read: "Cavalry to advance and take advantage of any opportunity to recover the Heights. They will be supported by the infantry which have been ordered to advance on two fronts." On receiving the order, Lucan moved the Light Brigade to the mouth of the north valley, while the Heavy Brigade remained in the south valley. However, he interpreted the message to mean that he should not attack until the infantry came up in support; thus, he and the men settled down to wait.
- Up on the ridge, Raglan grew angry with what he perceived as the willful inaction of Lucan's cavalry. His frustration reached a boiling point when one of his aides claimed to have spotted Russian horse teams preparing to haul away the cannons the Russians had captured in the redoubts. The report may not have been accurate, but Raglan took it at face value and decided that he must act.

- He drafted another message to Lucan that read: “Lord Raglan wishes the cavalry to advance rapidly to the front—follow the enemy and try to prevent the enemy carrying away the guns.” Raglan still intended the Causeway Heights as the target, but when Lucan received the message, he did not realize that it was intended as a follow-up to the earlier message; thus, he was confused about which target he was supposed to attack.
- From his position on the plain, Lucan could not see the guns in the redoubts but only the Russian batteries at the far end of the north valley; thus, he decided that these must be the intended target. Accordingly, he told Cardigan that the Light Brigade was to charge down the north valley and assault the Russian cannons at the far end.
  - This was clearly a suicidal proposition: The vulnerable horsemen would be exposed to fire not only from the cannons at the far end but from batteries and troops on the right and left sides of the valley, as well. Cardigan pointed this out, but Lucan replied only that the attack was the order of Lord Raglan.
  - The stage was now irrevocably set for the Light Brigade to fling itself down the north valley into the teeth of the Russian defenses and to advance for more than a mile across the valley floor while exposed to enemy cannon fire from three sides.
- Debate has raged ever since regarding who was to blame for the Light Brigade charging the wrong target. Raglan is criticized for drafting an unclear order and for sending it via an improperly briefed messenger. Lucan is censured for failing to put the messages together. Finally, Cardigan is faulted for blindly obeying an illogical order and for allowing his personal animosity for Lucan to prevent the two commanders from properly analyzing it.
- Whoever was at fault, the roughly 650 men of the Light Brigade now set off at a trot into the north valley with Cardigan at their head. As they drove deeper into the valley, more and more Russian guns could bear on them, and the ranks were ravaged by shot.

Finally, as they got within 50 yards of the Russian battery at the far end, they broke into a true charge.

- The surviving troopers were able to slash at the Russian gunners with their sabers or spear them with their lances. Soon, however, the masses of nearby Russian cavalry advanced, and the scattered British survivors were forced to attempt to escape back the way they had come. Cardigan basically abandoned his men, leaving the junior officers to rally the remnants and lead them back. This gave the Russians yet another chance to blast away at them with their cannons.

### **Aftermath of the Charge**

- Of 666 men known to have participated in the charge, 110 were killed, 129 wounded, and 32 taken prisoner, for a total casualty rate of more than 40 percent. Decimated by these losses, the Light Brigade was effectively finished as a fighting unit. The observers of the



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The charge of the Light Brigade immediately became a legend and is remembered as a glorious moment for British arms.

event, including Raglan, could not believe what they had witnessed. Technically, the charge reached its objective, but because they had killed only a few Russians before retreating, they had accomplished nothing of strategic importance at great cost to themselves.

- Raglan, Lucan, and Cardigan would spend the rest of their lives arguing over who had been at fault, and they all rather uncharitably tried to place most of the blame on the one man who could not defend himself, the dead messenger, Nolan. Their careers survived to varying degrees, but all eventually came away tarnished from the debacle.
- The siege of Sevastopol would drag on for almost a year until the city at last fell. By that point, however, public opinion in Britain and France had turned against the war, and a hurried peace treaty was signed; Russia lost a tiny bit of territory and promised not to expand its naval presence in the Black Sea. To achieve this rather inconclusive result, a total of half a million men had lost their lives.

### Suggested Reading

Adkin, *The Charge*.

Brighton, *Hell Riders*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Who deserves most of the blame for the Light Brigade attacking the wrong target, Raglan, Lucan, Cardigan, or Nolan, and why?
2. The charge of the Light Brigade resulted from a failure of communication. What are the various ways that relevant information was omitted, distorted, misrepresented, and misunderstood in this incident?

# Greasy Grass: Custer's Last Stand—1876

## Lecture 15

In early June of 1876, in what was then termed the Montana Territory, Chief Sitting Bull of the Hunkpapa Lakota prepared himself to undergo a grueling ceremony. After undergoing a ritual mutilation, the chief danced around a pole for many hours. Finally, he collapsed and had a vision in which he saw a large number of white soldiers and horses falling upside down into an Indian village, dropping, as he put it, “like grasshoppers.” By the end of the month, Sitting Bull’s vision would come true at the Battle of Little Bighorn. On June 25, the Lakota and their allies would wipe out George Armstrong Custer, along with more than 250 men of the U.S. 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry.

### Backdrop to Little Big Horn

- George Armstrong Custer was a polarizing figure who provoked strong responses from those around him. He had graduated last in his class from West Point, but with the outbreak of the Civil War, even inexperienced officers were in great demand in the northern army. By his mid-20s, Custer had become the youngest general in the army.
- After the war, when the army was cut back, Custer was lucky to obtain a position in the West. There, he gained a reputation as an “Indian fighter.” He was next assigned to the northern plains sector, where the indigenous peoples vigorously resisted encroachment on their lands.
- Without doubt, the treatment of the Native Americans by the



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**As a tactician, Custer favored bold charges; although usually effective, his methods could sometimes verge on rash.**

U.S. government and its agents during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was one of the less honorable episodes in American history. It was a long, painful process of, first, pushing Native American groups further westward, then driving them into ever-shrinking territories, and finally, attempting to compel them to adopt a sedentary agricultural lifestyle on reservations. The process was given a thin legal veneer through a succession of treaties that were often intentionally deceptive or flawed.

- The lifestyle of the Plains Indians had been transformed only a few generations earlier by the introduction of the horse and the gun. This enabled a nomadic existence in which tribes followed the migrations of the herds of buffalo that roamed the plains.
  - Many of these tribes were warrior societies, and there was near-constant warfare and shifting alliances among them. When white settlers began to cross the plains in large numbers, conflicts inevitably developed.
  - Exacerbating these problems were the different attitudes the two groups had toward property rights. For many of the Native Americans, no one could own the land, while the settlers were obsessed with legal partition and ownership of land.
  - By the 1870s, a number of reservations had been established, but many Native Americans preferred to continue their traditional ways of life freely roaming the plains. The main leader of this contingent was Sitting Bull, who refused to be confined to a reservation.
- The Battle of Little Bighorn was precipitated when gold was supposedly discovered in the Black Hills, located within the Great Sioux Reservation and regarded by them as sacred. Nevertheless, the U.S government began a campaign to buy or seize the lands and, in December of 1875, issued an ultimatum stating that any Indians who did not present themselves at a reservation by the end of January would be considered “hostiles.”

- In the spring of 1876, Sitting Bull summoned those who opposed going to the reservations, uniting a huge group of Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho. Meanwhile, the U.S. army had mobilized to enforce the ultimatum, and three columns of troops were dispatched from different points, with the goal of converging on Sitting Bull and his followers in the Montana Territory.
  - Custer and the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry were part the column that departed from Fort Abraham Lincoln in the Dakota Territory. On June 22, Custer and about 600 men were split off and told to scout up the Rosebud River toward the Little Bighorn River, searching for the so-called hostiles.
  - The intent was to catch them in a pincer maneuver, with Custer coming from the south and the rest of the column from the north.

### **The Fateful Battle**

- Custer picked up the trail left by Sitting Bull and his followers and, true to his aggressive nature, set off in pursuit. The numbers at Sitting Bull's camp had grown until more than 6,000 were gathered there, including perhaps 1,500 to 2,000 warriors. Among these was the most renowned war leader of the time, Crazy Horse.
- Custer's scouts brought word that there was a large encampment of Indians on the lower reaches of the Little Bighorn, and on the morning of June 25, Custer made plans to assault it. Because he planned to attack from several directions, he split his force into four groups.
- By mid-afternoon, the columns had become separated. One leader, Captain Benteen, found nothing on his sweep to the left; he swung back and followed Custer's route, although several miles behind him. Major Reno headed down into the river valley, while Custer's path on the right bank had led him to the top of the surrounding escarpment.
  - Around 3:00 p.m., Reno spotted a village up ahead. A bend in the river prevented him from seeing that, in fact, this was an enormous gathering of tribes.

- Reno at first planned to charge the camp with his 175 men, but as he drew closer, he had second thoughts; he ordered his men to dismount and form a line. They opened fire from a distance of about 400 yards.
- The southern section of the camp that Reno had blundered up against consisted of a circle of 260 lodges belonging to Sitting Bull's Hunkpapa Lakota. In response to the attack, the warriors in the camp moved southward toward the sound of the shooting, until a mass of 400 or 500 had collected. They began shooting back at Reno's thin line and moving to threaten them from the sides.
- Reno had an antagonistic relationship with Custer, and he was a heavy drinker. A number of times during the day's march, he had been observed draining flasks of whiskey, and several troopers recalled that his orders sounded slurred. Now, without organizing a rearguard, he told his men to retreat to the cover of a grove of woods.
  - The men fell back in a disorganized fashion and hid among the trees as the volume of fire around them increased. The situation was rapidly deteriorating, and Reno's lack of leadership did not help matters.
  - Finally, Reno himself seems to have panicked; he leapt on his horse and bolted uphill. His confused and demoralized men followed in his wake.
  - By the time they had scrambled up a ravine to the top of the ridge overlooking the river, one-quarter of Reno's men were dead, one-quarter were missing, and one-quarter were either wounded or separated.
- Although he knew that Reno had engaged the enemy, Custer was oblivious to this disaster and assumed that his encirclement strategy was working. He believed that he needed to push forward along the ridge to come at the enemy from the opposite side and trap them. Even while proceeding forward, he seems to have had



some doubts as the size of the encampment became evident. He dispatched a hastily scribbled message to Benteen to come quickly and to “bring packs.”

- As Benteen advanced, he came upon the survivors of Reno’s contingent. Although irascible, Benteen was brave and reasonably competent, and he stabilized the situation, imposing a degree of order and calm on Reno’s shattered division. Reno and Benteen then decided to wait for the pack train, which arrived shortly after 5:00 p.m.
- One detachment moved forward after the missing Custer, with Benteen following slowly behind it, trailed by Reno and the mules. This leading group ultimately got as far as a piece of high ground known as Weir Peak, but with large, threatening bodies of Indians roaming around, Benteen drew back and consolidated his forces at Reno’s hill.
- All the while, Custer had continued along the high ground paralleling the river, encountering only light resistance and still intent on his encirclement plan.
  - He split his men into two detachments, with one going forward far enough to sight the noncombatant refugees from the encampment gathering near a ford across the river. Cutting off this band was Custer’s initial goal, but with so many warriors gathering, the strategy became untenable. Now, it would be a fight for mere survival.
  - Crazy Horse had been slow to get involved in the battle, but once he rode out, warriors rallied around him in large numbers. He displayed his military acumen by embarking on an encirclement of his own that trapped Custer’s men.
- One wing of Custer’s forces drew themselves up on Calhoun Hill. They were surrounded and came under heavy fire. Ravaged by a storm of bullets and arrows, this group was overrun and slain.

- The fate of the detachment accompanying Custer is disputed, but they seem to have been pushed back in a running fight. The last survivors, including Custer, made a stand on what is known as Custer Hill. Here, the last knot of defenders was overwhelmed. The corpses of 42 cavalymen and 39 horses were found around this spot.
- Exactly how Custer died is another mystery, but his body was discovered with a gunshot wound to the chest and another to his left temple. The corpses of two of his brothers, his brother-in-law, and his nephew also lay nearby.

### **Outcomes of Little Big Horn**

- Back on Reno's hill, the other contingents of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry now came under siege. For the next day and a half, the soldiers held off the attacking warriors, although they suffered 50 more casualties. Satisfied with their victory, the triumphant Indians withdrew, and the remnants of the 7<sup>th</sup> were rescued by the arrival of the main army. During the battle, 268 of Custer's men had been killed and 62 wounded. Losses on the Native American side are estimated to have numbered several hundred.
- News of the shocking defeat prompted calls for revenge across the United States. In a series of campaigns, the Plains Indians were defeated and the remnants forced onto reservations. Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse were both eventually compelled to surrender. Crazy Horse was murdered soon after, while Sitting Bull lived for about a decade but was also killed under somewhat mysterious circumstances.
- The Battle of Little Big Horn soon became legendary; indeed, military historians still argue over exactly what happened and who was at fault. It remains one of the most famous—or infamous—battles in American history. Although it was a rare victory for the indigenous tribes of the Great Plains, it also ultimately hastened their defeat and the loss of their traditional way of life.

## Suggested Reading

Donovan, *A Terrible Glory*.

Philbrick, *The Last Stand*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Once Custer realized the size of the village, should he have canceled his attack and waited for the rest of the army? If he had done so, do you think he would have been heavily criticized?
2. Was there any way for Custer to have won the battle, or was he doomed from the start?

# Isandlwana: 25,000 Zulus Undetected—1879

## Lecture 16

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British colonial empire included nearly a fifth of the world. In the course of amassing this network of territories, the British army had frequently been called on to suppress or conquer indigenous groups—cultures that were technologically inferior to Victorian Britain. Such events tended to reinforce the Victorians' inclination to view their own civilization as superior and indigenous peoples as barbaric savages. These attitudes made the outcome of the Battle of Isandlwana all the more shocking. In this clash, an army of seasoned redcoats was wiped out by a horde of Zulu warriors. The battle ranks among the greatest single-day losses of British troops from the Napoleonic Wars to World War I.

### The Zulus and the British

- At the time of the Battle of Isandlwana, Zulus warriors fought nearly naked except for large, oval cowhide shields. They wielded short, broad-bladed stabbing spears called *assegai*, as well as occasional



In defending its empire in the late 19th century, it was not uncommon for Britain to engage in clashes pitting local warriors armed with spears or muskets against British troops with cannons and modern rifles.

light throwing spears and clubs. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some guns had been obtained from European settlers, although these were typically of antiquated design, and the gunpowder used by the Zulus was of dubious quality.

- The standard battle tactic used by the legendary founder of the Zulu kingdom, Shaka, was known as the *horns of the bull*. In this tactic, one section of the army, termed the *chest*, attacked straight on and held the enemy in place, while two other divisions, the *left* and *right horns*, swept around to assault the foe from the sides and behind. It was a classic tactic of encirclement and annihilation.
- Shaka had also established the *amabutho* system, in which young, unmarried men were divided into military regiments by age. It was not a true standing army, but the men were available for call-up in emergencies. Shaka had been assassinated in 1828, but his system was preserved. The current king, Cetshwayo, was an able administrator and desired good relations with the British.
- The commander in chief of the British forces in the war against the Zulus would be a man named Chelmsford, a British aristocrat who had served in various colonial posts. His greatest weakness in the coming war may have been his condescending attitude toward indigenous peoples, whom he clearly viewed as inferior. This mentality would lead him to underestimate the potential threat posed by the Zulu army.
- Another key figure in the battle would be Colonel Durnford. In contrast to Chelmsford, Durnford was sympathetic to the indigenous peoples and got along with them well. Probably for this reason, he was placed in charge of a contingent of mounted native troops within the British army. Durnford had a reputation of being impulsive and too independent minded, and Chelmsford seems to have distrusted him.

### **Pretense for War**

- Coastal regions of South Africa had been settled by mainly Dutch immigrants during the era of exploration, and their descendants

were known as the Boers. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the need for bases during the Napoleonic Wars had motivated the British to establish colonies in the region, and for a while, all these groups coexisted, along with indigenous nations, such as the Zulu kingdom.

- The discovery of diamonds, however, prompted the British to annex much more land, and the senior British administrators concocted a plan to create a new British-controlled confederation, incorporating the previously independent groups.
- Seeing the Zulu nation as an impediment to this scheme, the administrators, who had previously had amicable relations with the Zulus, now began to look for an excuse to provoke a war with them. They found it in a minor border dispute between the Zulus and some Boers.
- Chelmsford was put in charge of an offensive against the Zulus and was given a force of about 12,000 men. He chose to divide up his army into a three-pronged assault, with himself leading the main central column.

### **The Horns of the Bull**

- King Cetshwayo called up the various *amabutho* regiments, and an army of an estimated 25,000 men gathered at his capital by mid-January of 1879. The king and his advisors correctly identified the center British column as the primary offensive thrust and recognized that their best chance was to concentrate their forces and try to destroy each column separately. Therefore, Cetshwayo designated small detachments to harry and delay the right and left British columns, while his main force moved against the center one.
- When word came that the British center column had crossed into Zulu territory, the Zulu army set off to intercept it. By January 21, they had moved to within five miles of the British. After crossing a river, Chelmsford and the British camped beneath a rocky outcrop called Isandlwana Hill, erecting their tents in a long line.

Chelmsford considered the Isandlwana camp a temporary stop and did not think it worth the effort to fortify.

- The next day, Chelmsford sent out scouting parties in a number of directions. Several of these reported encountering groups of Zulus, but it was not until after nightfall that word came of at least several hundred Zulus in some nearby hills. This was not the main Zulu army, which remained undiscovered.
  - Chelmsford decided to take about half his troops and two-thirds of his cannons and try to catch the group his scouts had sighted—a move that would divide his force yet again. He also sent an order to Colonel Durnford, who was further to the rear, instructing him to proceed to the main camp with his own column of mounted native troops.
  - Chelmsford rode out before dawn, but when he and his force arrived in the hills, they encountered only small, isolated bands of Zulus.
- Meanwhile, reports had begun to arrive of a large contingent of Zulus moving toward the camp. The officer in charge, Pulleine, sent out some scouts and had his men form a long, curving defensive line several hundred yards in front of the tents. Durnford arrived and decided to take some of his cavalry to reconnoiter the terrain in front of the right side of the camp. Including Durnford's company, there were now about 1,700 men in and around the camp.
- About four miles from camp, one of Pulleine's scouting groups spotted a few Zulus shepherding a herd of cows over the top of a ridge and pursued them. As the scouts rode over the crest of the ridge, they saw thousands of silent Zulu warriors arrayed in their regiments. As one, this mass of warriors rose up and sprang toward the terrified scouts. The scouts fired off a volley and fled before the onrushing tide of Zulus.
- The Zulu regiments ran after the retreating scouts in the direction of the camp. Although the battle had started in a spontaneous manner,

the regiments shook themselves out into the classic horns-of-the-bull formation. Durnford's group then ran into the approaching left horn of the Zulu army.

- Durnford had his men dismount, take shelter in a gully, and open fire. This slowed the onrush of the Zulus, but there were far too many to stop; thus, Durnford and his men fell back, shot another volley, then moved back again. In this fashion, they fought a slow retreat toward the camp.
- A small unit of artillerymen with rockets set up their rocket launchers but managed to shoot off only a single rocket before they were overrun and killed.
- Back at the camp, the terrain hid the movements of the encircling left horn, but the right horn and the solid body of the chest regiments were seen approaching. The thin line of British troops opened fire, and the two cannons joined in. Confronted by this substantial firepower, the Zulu advance ground to a halt. The Zulus replied with their guns and sought to crawl forward during the pauses between volleys.
- As more Zulus appeared, Pulleine's line contracted. Durnford's company eventually made a stand along the lip of a gully just to the right and in front of the main line.
  - For a short while, there was a stalemate, but aggressive groups of Zulus began to move around the flanks of Durnford and other exposed units to infiltrate between the scattered clusters of British soldiers. With Zulus now coming at him from both sides and the front, Durnford ordered his men to fall back.
  - With their withdrawal, the entire right flank of the main line was now exposed. Some of the native infantry began to drop back toward the camp; soon, the entire line collapsed.
- The British tried to fall back and form a shorter, more defensible line near the tents, but the Zulus rushed forward so quickly that they



became intermingled with the fleeing redcoats, and the situation devolved into chaos. Somewhere in the melee, Pulleine was slain, as was Durnford.

- The survivors now sought to flee back toward the river and escape, but most were caught by the onrushing horns, run to ground, and slaughtered. Too late, Chelmsford got news of the massacre and marched back, arriving near dark to find the camp looted and abandoned, with nothing remaining but blood-soaked bodies. More than 1,300 British had been killed. Total Zulu casualties were probably similar.

### **Summing Up Isandlwana**

- To avenge the defeat at Isandlwana, the British organized a larger, more carefully executed invasion. In a series of battles, the Zulus were defeated, Cetshwayo was deposed, and the Zulu kingdom was broken up.
- In earlier accounts of Isandlwana, several theories were put forward to explain the British defeat. One of the most commonly repeated of these is that the British line in front of the camp was holding back the Zulus—until they ran out of ammunition. Recent archaeological finds, however, indicate that sufficient ammunition was reaching the troops.
- Although the British made a number of serious errors, their defeat at Isandlwana was as much a result of the bravery and skill of the Zulus.
  - In deciding to concentrate their entire army against a single isolated and vulnerable British column, the Zulu generals demonstrated a sound sense of strategy. Bringing their army so close to the enemy camp without being detected took considerable skill, speed, and field craft. And in pressing home their charge, even in the face of sustained fire, the Zulus warriors displayed great individual courage and determination.

- At the time, racist attitudes dictated that such a catastrophic defeat must surely be due to British errors rather than Zulu skill, and this perspective has influenced subsequent accounts of the battle. Today, it is possible to say that the outcome of Isandlwana was shaped by British overconfidence and miscalculation, as well as by the resolution and cleverness of their foes.

### Suggested Reading

Knight, *Zulu Rising*.

Lock and Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*.

### Questions to Consider

1. We often assume that superior technology translates into domination on the battlefield. In what ways did the Zulus compensate for their inferior technology?
2. Would you consider the outcome of this battle more the result of British blunders or Zulu skill?

# Adwa: Italy's Fiasco in Ethiopia—1896

## Lecture 17

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of vigorous colonial expansion by Western industrialized nations. As part of this process, innumerable indigenous peoples were defeated and subjugated by means of military force. In this litany of imperialism, however, the Battle of Adwa stands out. There, the Ethiopians beat an Italian army intent on turning their country into an overseas possession of Italy. As we've seen, such upsets did happen, but Adwa is anomalous for two reasons. First, the Ethiopians used technology that was equal—or even superior—to that of the colonial power. More importantly, their victory had permanence. It decisively ended the war, and Ethiopia gained international legitimacy and recognition as an independent African nation.

### Ethiopia and Italy

- In 1884, Otto von Bismarck, the chancellor of Germany, hosted the Berlin Conference, at which the major European states had divided up nearly all of Africa into spheres of influence. Among Italy's allotted share were Eritrea and Somalia in East Africa. Sandwiched between these was one of the few remaining independent African nations, Ethiopia. Italy coveted that country and began to look for ways to extend its dominion over it.
- Ethiopia was composed of a number of kingdoms, each with its own monarch, but there was also an emperor—named Yohannes—who ruled over all of them. In the aftermath of the Berlin Conference, there were a number of skirmishes between Ethiopia and the Italians. These early encounters gave the Italians a false confidence that in a straight battle, they could easily overcome even large numbers of Ethiopians.
- Ethiopian politics of this era were complicated. In addition to Italy, another external threat was posed by Egypt, which had invaded Ethiopia in 1875. Internally, there was strife between the northern and southern areas of Ethiopia and power struggles over the throne. The

Italians were able to play off these conflicts, backing one or another of the factions in return for expanding their influence and territory.

- One of the main contenders for power in Ethiopia was Menelik II, the king of the southern Shoa region. Menelik had given nominal submission to the current emperor, but he plainly dreamed of seizing the throne for himself. Eager to expand into Ethiopia, the Italians sought to take advantage of this internal power struggle by providing aid to Menelik, hoping that if he won, he would grant them territorial concessions and favor them in his policy.
- One of the main items that Menelik consistently sought to gain in his dealings with Europeans was modern weapons. In the course of negotiations with the Italians and others, he had acquired thousands of excellent modern rifles, ammunition, and a substantial number of quick-firing, long-range cannons.
- When the current emperor, Yohannes, was killed in 1889, Menelik's chance to seize power arrived. Aided by his modern weapons, he made himself ruler of the country. He then sought to reach an accommodation with his Italian backers. In a treaty signed in Rome, Menelik acknowledged Italian control over Eritrea and some coastal regions in return for Italy's recognition of him as emperor of Ethiopia. It seemed an amicable agreement but contained within it was one section that would lead to war.
  - In the version of the treaty written in Italian, the wording of one clause essentially stated that Ethiopia would have its foreign policy dictated by Italy. In the version written in Amharic, Ethiopia's language, the same clause seemed to allow Menelik to conduct his own foreign policy. The difference in terminology was subtle, but the disparity in meaning was enormous.
  - When Menelik found out about the Italian version, he felt betrayed. When the Italians insisted that he yield to their desires in all diplomatic matters, he repudiated the treaty. Italy jumped on this as a pretext to turn Ethiopia into a colony, and thus, the war began.

## **Confrontation in Ethiopia**

- The Italian general tasked with invading Ethiopia was the governor of Eritrea, Oreste Baratieri. He had an army of just under 20,000 men, organized into four brigades. Three were made up of Italian troops, while one brigade was composed of Askari, native troops recruited mostly from Eritrea and serving under Italian officers. Baratieri also had 56 cannons, although they were shorter ranged and slower firing than Menelik's artillery. To meet the invasion, regions throughout Ethiopia contributed large contingents of troops.
- The Italians would come from the north. Starting out from his stronghold in the south, Menelik began an epic march across the length of Ethiopia, amassing soldiers as he went. Eventually, his army probably numbered around 100,000 warriors and more than 40 cannon. As the two armies drew together, each side wanted the other to be the attacker in order to gain the advantage of defending a prepared position; the result was a standoff.
- The prime minister of Italy, Crispi, grew increasingly frustrated with this inaction and dispatched a series of angry telegrams to Baratieri. Finally, he decided to have Baratieri removed from command but could not resist sending him one final provocative message that verged on calling him a coward. Stung by this and with his subordinates agitating for action, Baratieri agreed to advance toward Menelik's army, which was encamped near the town of Adwa.
- Baratieri devised a plan in which three of the four brigades of the Italian army would advance during the night and take up positions along a line defined by three mountains and the two passes separating them.
  - General Dabormida's brigade would deploy in the northern pass; General Albertone would position his men in the southern pass; and General Arimonde, with the center brigade, would array his men on the forward slope of the mountain that lay between them. Baratieri and the fourth brigade would act as a reserve.

- The idea was that this forward deployment would goad Menelik into launching a frontal assault against these strong positions, from which the disciplined Italians could break the larger Ethiopian army.
- Although perhaps not brilliant, it was at least a viable plan, but nearly everything went wrong with its execution. To begin with, there was confusion over whether the Italian units were merely supposed to move into these positions and hold or were meant to attack.
  - General Albertone's brigade, charged with occupying the southern pass, was made up of four battalions of Askari. The leading battalion quickly reached its assigned position and halted. But Albertone, mistakenly believing that they had not gone far enough, ordered them to continue.
  - By dawn, this lead battalion had reached the edge of Menelik's camp. The camp guards opened fire on them, and they finally stopped, horribly exposed and miles out of position. Roused out of their tents by the sound of gunfire, the Ethiopians attacked in waves that grew steadily larger.
  - The Italians inflicted heavy casualties but stood little chance. Soon, the high-quality rifles of the Ethiopians were joined by their cannon, and the situation of the detached battalion became even more perilous. The other three battalions of Albertone's brigade were drawn into the conflict, but they were four miles forward from where Baratieri had intended and, thus, unable to get support from the rest of the army.
- Baratieri had no choice but to try to assist Albertone's stranded brigade. He ordered Dabormida in the northern pass to take his brigade forward and deploy slightly behind and to the side of Albertone, thus linking them together in a defensive line. Dabormida moved out, but when he came to a fork in the road, he inexplicably went north instead of south, leading his men away from the action.

- Menelik now saw a golden opportunity to split the Italian army and destroy it piecemeal. He drove a large force of his men into the gap between Albertone's and Dabormida's brigades. Albertone's group broke, with men attempting to flee back toward the rest of the army.
- By now, the center brigades were also under assault, and the reserves were trying to shore up the crumbling situation. With most of the Italians caught out of position, the Ethiopians were able to occupy stretches of high ground and pour fire down on them. The officers, clearly distinguishable by bright sashes across their chests, made particularly good targets for the Ethiopian marksmen. Of 610 Italian officers in the army, 352 became casualties.
- Dabormida's isolated northern battalion had set itself up in a steep valley; thus removed from the key zone of the battle, these men were relatively ignored for a while by the Ethiopians. Now, they, too, came under assault. By midafternoon, each of the Italian brigades had been shattered, and the survivors were fleeing backwards.
- The number of Italians killed is estimated to have been around 5,000, with thousands more injured. The number of Ethiopian casualties was probably slightly greater. An additional 3,400 Italian soldiers were captured by the Ethiopians. In keeping with a local custom of trophy taking, some of the Italian dead, and apparently even some wounded, were castrated on the battlefield. This act would understandably provoke condemnation, particularly from European nations.

### **Errors of the Italians**

- The victory at Adwa ended the Italian campaign to annex Ethiopia, and the country gained international recognition. Menelik ruled until his death in 1913. General Baratieri escaped and was court-martialed. Although acquitted, his military career was over, and he went into retirement.
- The Italians made a number of fundamental errors that resulted in their defeat at Adwa. Taking a big-picture view, one could argue

that the entire effort to transform Ethiopia into an Italian colony was ill-conceived. Ethiopia did not offer lucrative exports of raw materials or agricultural products; thus, its conquest did not make much economic sense. Italian colonialism in East Africa seems to have been driven more by the desire of some Italian politicians to gain prestige for their country.

- As for the attack itself, it suffered from problems at every level. Its purpose was unclear, with both officers and men uncertain about whether they were intended to assault the Ethiopian positions or advance and try to provoke an attack. This failure was exacerbated by the behavior and attitudes of the generals in charge of the main brigades. Not only were they touchy and arrogant, but they were also in disagreement over strategy and failed to cooperate.
- Overconfidence, lack of clarity, pigheadedness, miscalculation, and stupidity were all amply displayed by the Italians at Adwa, and the net result was one of the greatest victories of an indigenous people over an imperial power during the era of colonization.

### Suggested Reading

Jonas, *The Battle of Adwa*.

### Questions to Consider

1. The effects of the Battle of Adwa defied the usual pattern of colonial warfare in that the indigenous people achieved long-term independence. What made things different in this case?
2. Do you think the Italians deliberately misled Menelik with the wording of clause 17 in the treaty?



# Colenso: The Second Boer War—1899

## Lecture 18

By the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, military technology had advanced to the point where the tactics that had served the British Empire well during the Napoleonic Wars and most of the subsequent century were no longer viable. In those wars, massed lines of infantry standing upright and shoulder to shoulder had ruled the battlefield. With slow-firing, short-ranged muskets, such formations made sense, but with the advent of quick-firing rifles, machine guns, and more powerful cannon, marching upright across a battlefield became a suicidal proposition. The Napoleonic-era methods would collide with new weapons and tactics during the Second Boer War, fought between the British and the Boers in South Africa.

### Background on the Boers

- The Boers (“farmers”) were the descendants of mostly Dutch immigrants who had settled around the Cape of Africa in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.
  - When the British arrived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the independent-minded Boers resented the idea of submitting to British rule, and in the 1830s, many departed and sought territory elsewhere in Africa.
  - They founded two Boer republics, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, but there were ongoing conflicts with the British and with the indigenous African civilizations. The discovery of diamonds and gold created yet more friction among these groups.
  - An abortive attempt to seize their lands by force masterminded by British magnate Cecil Rhodes further alienated the Boers. Tensions increased until war was declared in October of 1899.
- The culture of the Boers was suspicious of formal structures and institutions; thus, the Boers seemed ill-suited to take on the highly organized and disciplined British army. The Boers, however, were

from tough farmer stock and had excellent field craft skills. In times of war, they gathered in loose groups known as *commandos*, making a formidable force well-suited to a hit-and-run style of warfare.

- Just before the outbreak of war, the Boer government had imported a vast quantity of modern, technologically sophisticated firearms, including German-made Mauser rifles. In contrast to the rifle being used by British troops, into which bullets had to be inserted one by one, the Mauser employed a five-bullet clip, allowing for swift reloading.

### Lead-Up to Colenso

- At the outset of the war, the Boers besieged several towns, including Ladysmith. When General Redvers Buller, a soldier of the old school, took over the British army in South Africa, the Boers were holding a defensive line along the Thukela River. Buller needed to break through this barrier to relieve the siege of Ladysmith, but the Boers held the crossings and were dug in on high ground overlooking the river.
- In December of 1899, the British suffered embarrassing defeats at Stormberg and Magersfontein, putting pressure on Buller to score a victory. Although he had originally contemplated an outflanking maneuver against the Boers, he now unwisely felt the need for an immediate assault. This would take place near the town of Colenso.
- The commander in chief of the Boers facing Buller was Louis Botha, who had recently been given the position. Botha had



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**In the aftermath of Colenso and another defeat at the Battle of Spion Kop, Redvers Buller's reputation was so low that critics derisively called him "Reverse" Buller.**

only a minimal education, but he was intelligent and a natural and inspiring leader.

### **Three-Pronged Assault**

- Botha had the Boers dig a series of trenches and foxholes along the high ground overlooking the river at Colenso, then settled down to await the British. When concealed in these pits, they were almost totally invisible, and the smokeless gunpowder they used did not reveal their positions when firing.
- Although the British outnumbered the Boers by about 20,000 to 5,000, Buller was hampered by having only an old farm survey of the area and rudimentary intelligence about the Boer positions.
- The scheme that Buller came up with called for a three-pronged assault.
  - On the left, Hart's Irish Brigade would head toward a ford, where they would cross the river and engage the Boers. In the center, a brigade under Hildyard would attack near the town of Colenso. On the far right, Dundonald, with a small force, would move toward the hill of Hlangwane, mostly as a diversion. The attacks would be supported by several batteries of cannons that would deploy outside of the Boer's rifle range and fire over the heads of the attacking British troops.
  - The plan was straightforward and unimaginative, consisting of head-on assaults against strong defensive positions. Buller seems not to have realized that the hill of Hlangwane was actually an important strategic location; from its summit, gunfire could be directed down into the trenches of the Boer left flank, potentially dislodging their entire line.
  - A better strategy for the battle might have focused on first seizing this high ground, then crossing the river once the Boers had been driven from their entrenchments.

- The commander of the main artillery section was Colonel Long, an impetuous and aggressive officer, who believed that artillery should be used at point-blank range. Long commanded a battery of 12 cannons, which he pushed ahead of the infantry and drew up in a neat row only 700 yards from the river. This forward positioning placed the cannons and their crews within range of the Boers in their pits.
- The Boers took advantage of this target, unleashing a deadly fire that killed or wounded six of the artillery officers in the first couple of minutes. After enduring nearly an hour of the Boer fusillade, the artillerymen had paid a high price. Long had been shot, 12 gunners lay dead, 29 more were wounded, and the guns were running low on ammunition. The battered survivors ran back to the cover of a deep gully, abandoning their row of cannons.
- Meanwhile, on the left, Hart's Irish Brigade had made an equally inept attack. Hart was another firm believer in the old tactics and emphasized that during an attack, the men should advance in well-ordered, tightly packed ranks.
  - He paraded his men toward the river, led by a local guide who was supposed to show them the location of a ford. Instead, the guide led them to a deep, narrow bend. This loop was surrounded on three sides by entrenched Boers, into which Hart's 4,000 men marched in formation.
  - Again, the Boers were presented with an irresistible target and unleashed a withering fire from their Mausers. Hart urged his men forward, where they crowded into the enclosed end of the loop, then milled about confusedly.
  - Some desperate soldiers threw themselves into the river and attempted to swim across but were either drowned or shot. When some of the officers began to disperse the men to make them more difficult targets, Hart angrily ordered them back into close ranks. Finally, after an hour, the brigade was ordered to withdraw. In that time, they had suffered 532 casualties.

- The other main prong of the assault under Hildyard got started a little later and managed to move toward the town of Colenso. Unlike Hart, Hildyard had his troops advance in open skirmish order, which did not make them as easy a target. Nevertheless, they, too, came under fire from Boers in hidden rifle pits. Hildyard's men pressed forward to the edge of the town and took cover, returning the Boer fire. They drove some of the Boers out of their positions, but with the overall attack completely stalled, they could not cross the river and eventually retreated, as well.
- Finally, there was the diversionary assault on Hlangwane Hill by Dundonald. He pushed his men in skirmish order up through the broken ground at the base of the hill, while sending some around the side to outflank the Boers. He pressed the Boers hard but did not have quite enough men to break the impasse and capture the hill. He sent urgent messages asking for some of the reserves to be committed, but his requests went unanswered, and the chance to seize the important high ground was lost.
- Part of the problem was Buller, who should have stayed at his central command post to oversee the battle and take advantage of such opportunities. Instead he had become obsessed with recovering the battery of 12 cannons that Long had abandoned out on the plain. Buller had personally gone to the gulley in which the surviving artillerymen were hiding to supervise the recovery attempts. This effectively removed the commander in chief from playing any role in the larger battle.
- Even though the battle had been going on for only a couple of hours and he still had a good number of his total forces uncommitted, after failing to recover the cannons, Buller seems to have lost the ability to objectively evaluate the situation. He abruptly called off the attack and precipitously ordered everyone to retreat. The jubilant Boers were able to take possession of 10 fine artillery pieces.
- Total British casualties at Colenso were 1,127 killed, wounded, missing, or captured. On the Boer side, there were fewer than 50

casualties. With poor scouting, use of outdated tactics, and errors of judgment made by the British commanders, it had been a thorough debacle.

### End of the Boer War

- Somewhat belatedly, Buller began to learn from his mistakes. He launched another offensive, this time gathering intelligence on the route and the Boer positions. His men advanced in open order, making use of available cover and natural features of the geography. Carefully aimed artillery softened up the Boer defenses ahead of the troops, and an innovative *creeping barrage* of cannon fire was used to give them cover while advancing. By these means, the British finally crossed the Thukela River and continued toward Ladysmith.
- Meanwhile, on the other western front of the war, Lord Roberts was appointed as commander. He managed to drive back the Boers there, as well, and eventually captured Pretoria, ending the main phase of war. Boer guerillas fought on for some time and harassed the British with hit-and-run raids. To cut off support for them, Roberts controversially rounded up Boer families and imprisoned them. He also systematically burned and destroyed farms. A peace treaty was signed in 1902, and shortly thereafter, the Union of South Africa became part of the British Commonwealth.
- The Boer War plainly demonstrated that one era of military tactics was over, and the conflict foreshadowed many of the techniques that would feature in 20<sup>th</sup>-century warfare. The obsolescence of these old methods was most clearly evident at the Battle of Colenso, where the pigheaded determination of the British commanders to use outdated tactics resulted in an ineffectual attack and turned what should have been a battle into little more than target practice for the Boers.

## Suggested Reading

Knight, *Colenso*, 1899.

Pakenham, *The Boer War*.

## Questions to Consider

1. At the beginning of the Second Boer War, the British were guilty of fighting with the tactics of “the last war.” What are some other examples of this?
2. What characteristics of the Boers made them well-suited to wage guerilla-style warfare?

# Tannenberg: Ineptitude in the East—1914

## Lecture 19

In the early morning of August 30, 1914, a Russian general named Alexander Samsonov stumbled through a swamp near the border of East Prussia. Just four days earlier, he had been the commander of a mighty Russian army, conducting a successful invasion into German territory. But the Germans had somehow turned the tables and encircled Samsonov's army. Attacks from every direction had fragmented his once seemingly invincible battalions; now, he and a few remaining staff members were on the run. Around 1:00 a.m., when the refugees paused for a rest, Samsonov walked into some nearby woods and killed himself, thus bringing to a close one of the most dramatic episodes of the First World War, the Battle of Tannenberg.

### Early Invasion of France

- The years leading up to the outbreak of World War I had seen the European nations locking themselves into a complex web of alliances and treaties. One major power block consisted of Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Italy; opposing them was a coalition of France, Russia, and the United Kingdom.
- When contemplating war, Germany's greatest challenge was the fact that it was sandwiched between Russia and France. Realizing that fighting a war on two fronts was likely to end in defeat, Germany military planners developed a bold strategy, known as the Schlieffen Plan, designed to knock France out of the war in just six weeks. The plan called for committing seven of the eight German field armies to an attack on France, leaving just one, the Eighth Army, to guard the eastern border with Russia.
- Although the main Russian armed forces would take several months to mobilize, their First and Second armies were already stationed on the border. The German Eighth Army numbered about 150,000 men, while the two Russian armies could muster close to 400,000. Because of this, the Germans expected the two Russian



armies to immediately advance into Germany when war broke out. In fact, Russia's treaty with France specified that if Germany attacked France, the Russians were obligated to invade Germany within 15 days.

- On August 3, 1914, Germany declared war on France, and the next day, the western German armies began their drive toward Paris. With this act, all the treaties were activated, and the armies were mobilized. On August 17, troops of the Russian First Army crossed the border and began their promised attack. The German territory they invaded was East Prussia.
- This territory was a sparsely inhabited zone composed of a mixture of swamps, hills, small lakes, forests, and scrubby fields. In the middle of this zone were the Masurian Lakes, a 50-mile network of waterways and bodies of water that constituted a formidable barrier. The Masurian Lakes would create a natural split in the invading Russian forces, forcing one army to swing north and the other south. With such rugged terrain and few landmarks, the region favored defense and impeded rapid movements.
- The man in charge of the German Eighth Army was General Maximilian von Prittwitz. His Russian opponents were Pavel von Rennenkampf, in charge of the Russian First Army, and Alexander Samsonov, the general of the Russian Second Army.
  - The Russian high command directed Rennenkampf and the First Army to advance into East Prussia, passing to the north of the Masurian Lakes, while Samsonov and the Second Army went around the southern end. This pincer movement was intended to catch the German Eighth Army between the two Russian forces and annihilate it.
  - The two Russian generals were members of rival cliques in the officer corps, and it is likely that there was some animosity between them. Although they had been ordered to maintain "close liaison" in the coming campaign, their relationship probably impeded such cooperation.

- The Russian invasion of East Prussia began promisingly. By August 20, Rennenkampf's northern army had advanced more than 20 miles, and the German commander, Prittwitz, decided to attempt a counterattack near the town of Gumbinnen.
- After some back-and-forth fighting, the Russian heavy artillery helped to blunt the attack, and the Germans fell back in confusion. Rather than aggressively pressing his advantage, however, Rennenkampf seems to have been content with this relatively minor victory; further pursuit of the Germans on his part would be lackadaisical.
- At roughly the same time that Prittwitz heard about the reversal at Gumbinnen, a report reached him that the southern Russian Second Army was also advancing into East Prussia. Prittwitz seems to have realized that he was in imminent danger of being encircled by the Russians. He decided to abandon the region and withdraw his army 200 miles, behind the Vistula River. Prittwitz was fired by the German high command.
- As a replacement, Paul von Hindenburg, one of Germany's most eminent generals, was called in. Hindenburg's chief of staff was another good choice: Erich Ludendorff, an energetic and creative officer. This duo boarded a specially chartered express train and rushed toward the front to assume command.

### **A Bold German Plan**

- Back in East Prussia, one of Prittwitz's staff members, Max Hoffman, saw a potential opportunity in the Russian advance. Already separated by the Masurian Lakes, the Russian First and Second armies did not seem to be coordinating their movements. The units of the German Eighth Army were widely dispersed and outnumbered as they tried to oppose both Russian armies. If, however, the Germans concentrated all their units together, they might be able to take on one of the Russian armies on terms that were close to equal.

- Hoffman proposed withdrawing all units that were currently facing Rennenkampf in the north and concentrating them against Samsonov's army in the south. This was a risky move because if Rennenkampf were to advance more aggressively, there would be nothing to stop him. Another danger was that the Germans might become trapped between the two Russian armies. Everything depended on Rennenkampf maintaining his glacial pace and on the two Russian armies failing to coordinate their movements.
- When Hindenburg and Ludendorff arrived, they quickly came to the same conclusion as Hoffman, and the bold plan was put into action. Between August 21 and 26, the German units facing Rennenkampf marched swiftly southward to join up with their comrades opposing Samsonov. Only a handful of cavalry was left behind as a flimsy screen.
- During this tense time, the Germans' resolve to persist in their maneuver was bolstered by several blunders made by the Russians.
  - Early in the invasion, a copy of the Russians' plans had been found on the body of a dead officer. This document confirmed that the two armies planned to proceed by separate paths divided by the Masurian Lakes.
  - In addition, the Russian armies' communication equipment was woefully inadequate, and messages sent by radio between the Russian generals were not coded, allowing the Germans to listen in on these transmission.
  - Finally, neither Rennenkampf nor Samsonov had devoted sufficient effort to reconnaissance to track the Germans' movements.
- By August 27, the Germans had redeployed and were assaulting Samsonov from all sides. The Russian battalions were caught by surprise and strung out, but they fought back with dogged determination. For the next three days, the German vise continued to close around the Russians, forcing them into an ever-smaller pocket.

- Another factor that came into play was the inadequate supply system of the Russian army. There were not enough transport animals to carry the needed supplies, and in general, the measures taken to keep the men fed were badly organized and insufficient. Samsonov's men were now in a weakened state from lack of food.



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- All this time, Hindenburg and Ludendorff anxiously watched Rennenkampf's army to the north. If Rennenkampf were to turn south, he could easily push aside the thin screening force and come crashing in on the Germans from the rear. This was the crisis point of the battle; the Germans steadily chipped away at Samsonov's encircled army, but they needed time to finish its destruction.
- Rennenkampf, however, continued his crawling progress due westward. Whatever the cause of his failure to turn south, the result was that the Germans were able to complete their destruction of the Russian Second Army.
- By August 30, Samsonov's vast army had been completely shattered, and Russian resistance had crumbled. That night, Samsonov, exhausted and guilt-ridden, shot himself in the head. The next day, incredible numbers of exhausted and demoralized Russian troops began to surrender to the victorious German soldiers. The Russian losses amounted to 92,000 men taken prisoner and 50,000 dead and wounded. Against this shocking number, German casualties were a mere 10,000 to 15,000.

**For three days, Samsonov's battalions fought a nearly continuous series of desperate battles among the bogs and forests of East Prussia, but they were ultimately overcome by the Germans.**

## **Victory at Tannenberg**

- The elated German commanders selected the name Tannenberg for this victory, recalling a catastrophic defeat the Germans had experienced in 1410. By giving the victorious 1914 battle the same name, the Germans symbolically avenged and wiped clean the disgrace of the earlier disaster.
- Hindenburg and Ludendorff now turned to the threat of Rennenkampf, who was still deep in Germany territory. On September 8, the Germans began attacking the northern Russian army. After five days, Rennenkampf's army had suffered a significant number of casualties and was pushed back into Russia but was able to withdraw intact and remained a viable combat unit.
- The sequence of linked battles in East Prussia had ultimately been a horrific tragedy for Russia. In two and a half weeks of fighting, the Russians had suffered 250,000 casualties and lost a great deal of equipment; one army commander had committed suicide; and three corps commanders had been taken prisoner. Yet even losses on this scale did not seriously weaken the overall strength of the Russian army.
- The real significance of the Battle of Tannenberg lies in the influence that the eastern front had on the war in the west.
  - The Germans had launched their invasion of France with great initial success. In fact, the German high command felt that victory in France was so certain it would be safe to remove two army corps away from the offensive in France and send them to reinforce the Eighth Army in East Prussia. But by the time these forces had been transported across Germany, the Battle of Tannenberg was already won.
  - Meanwhile, however, the offensive in France had bogged down and was ultimately stopped just a few miles short of Paris at the Battle of the Marne. Ever since, historians have speculated that the Germans might have succeeded in capturing Paris had the attack in France not been fatally weakened at that key moment

by sending these two army corps to East Prussia. If they had captured Paris, the Germans might have won World War I, and the subsequent course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would have been radically different.

### Suggested Reading

Showalter, *Tannenberg*.

Sweetman, *Tannenberg, 1914*.

### Questions to Consider

1. At Tannenberg, the German commanders took a huge risk by leaving *Rennenkampf* unguarded while they concentrated against *Samsonov*. It worked, but it could easily have backfired. Were they merely lucky, or was it a brilliantly calculated risk, and why?
2. If the Germans had not withdrawn the two army corps from the attack on France, had conquered Paris, and had defeated France at the outset of World War I, how do you think this would have changed the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

# Gallipoli: Churchill Dooms Allied Assault—1915

## Lecture 20

After the battles of Tannenberg and the Marne, World War I bogged down into trench warfare. Britain's leaders began to look for a way to break this stalemate. Britain's greatest area of advantage over Germany was its powerful navy; thus, Winston Churchill came up with a plan that would use the navy to force a passage through the Dardanelles, the waterway separating Europe from Asia. It was believed that British warships could then threaten Constantinople, knock the Ottoman Empire—a German ally—out of the war, and facilitate communication with Russia. For this scheme, Churchill planned to use outdated battleships; at the last minute, these were supplemented by the newer dreadnaught *Queen Elizabeth* and a battlecruiser, the *Inflexible*.

### The Naval Campaign

- The naval assault at Gallipoli began on February 19, 1915. Ten British battleships cruised into the entrance of the Dardanelles and engaged the Turkish guns on the shore. But after eight hours of steady bombardment, not a single Turkish cannon had been destroyed. Although subsequent attacks achieved a bit more success, the British had been overconfident in the estimation of their ability to disable the Turkish cannons. During the next month, the Allied squadron made repeated attacks on Turkish positions, with minimal results.
- The British minesweeping efforts in the straits were even more ineffectual. The navy had been unwilling to commit its frontline minesweepers to the expedition and, instead, had dispatched an assortment of 21 trawlers and fishing vessels manned by untrained civilian crews. These slow ships were easy targets for Turkish gunners on shore.
  - Eventually, the civilians were replaced by volunteer navy crews, but the ships were simply not up to the task. Out of 17

minesweeping missions attempted, the minesweepers managed to remove only 2 mines out of nearly 400.

- Confronted with these failures and under increasing pressure to produce results, the commander of the naval squadron experienced a breakdown and had to be replaced.
- Probably unwisely, the new admiral committed himself to an all-out attack, which was scheduled for March 18. On that day, all the battleships, organized into three successive waves, boldly advanced into the Dardanelles and blasted away at the defenses on shore. Again, however, the results were negligible.
  - In return for destroying one large Turkish cannon and temporarily disabling four others, the naval squadron paid a high price.
  - Three battleships struck mines and were sunk; three more were severely damaged; and many other ships suffered lighter damage. Overall, one-third of the squadron was either sunk or disabled.

### **The Land Campaign**

- Rather than cutting their losses and abandoning what was a bad idea to start with, the British now decided to commit army troops to an amphibious invasion aimed at seizing control of the straits. This decision undermined the original concept of the plan, which was to use naval power to assist the ground war in Europe without drawing any troops away from that front.
- The man put in charge of the amphibious attack on Gallipoli was General Ian Hamilton. Although he was an intelligent and experienced officer, his leadership style was passive and hands-off when what was needed in the coming campaign was a vigorous, assertive commander in chief. Compounding these faults, Hamilton had to work with poor intelligence, both on Turkish military capabilities and the terrain of the Gallipoli Peninsula.



- If the Allies had begun the campaign with the Gallipoli invasion, it might have succeeded. Originally, the peninsula was lightly defended by only two Turkish divisions. When the ineffectual naval attacks began, however, this was doubled to four divisions. A month-long delay in the packing of Allied cargo ships gave the Turks additional time to construct fortifications and augment their troops in the Gallipoli Peninsula with two more divisions.
- Hamilton devised an unnecessarily complicated plan that involved seven different landing sites plus a diversionary attack. Hamilton's orders to unit commanders rarely specified clear objectives, leaving a number of the assault groups uncertain as to how far they should advance or whether or not they were intended to constitute one of the main attacks.
- The landings began on April 25. Some 28,000 British troops of the 29<sup>th</sup> and Royal Naval divisions were assigned to land on five sites at the tip of the Gallipoli Peninsula, designated beaches S, V, W, X, and Y. About 10 miles further up the peninsula, the 31,000 men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian and New Zealand divisions, known by the acronym ANZACS, were to go ashore at Z beach. Finally, 17,000 French troops were to land on the Asian side of the straits at a site called Kum Kale.
- The landings met with mixed success. To the north, at Z beach, the ANZACS disembarked about a mile north of the intended spot. They initially met only weak defenses and might have seized strategically important high ground, but Mustafa Kemal, the local Turkish commander, rushed his men onto the heights. The ANZACS became pinned in a narrow zone close to the beach.
- Further south, at Y beach, the British troops landed completely unopposed and scrambled up a high cliff. They had a chance to seize a considerable amount of important high ground further inland before the Turks could react, but incredibly, the commander had his men merely sit at the top of the cliff for the whole day.

- At V, W, and X beaches, which encircled the tip of the peninsula, British troops encountered more opposition. These sites were overseen by Turkish trenches.
  - At W beach, Turkish machine guns sliced through the boats crammed with soldiers, killing dozens before they could even set foot ashore.
  - A naval bombardment was supposed to suppress the Turkish defenses at V beach, but it proved ineffectual. The British had concocted a scheme to pack 2,000 men into an old cargo ship, then run it ashore. In theory, the troops would pour out of holes cut in the side of the steamer and run down ramps onto the beach. In practice, however, the plan turned into a deathtrap. When the men emerged from the ship, they ran straight into a thick hail of gunfire, and nearly all were cut down. The survivors huddled inside until nightfall.
  - On all the beaches, the attacking troops soon became bogged down in the rough terrain after making only minimal headway. The Turks put up a dogged resistance, launching a number of counterattacks that caused them to incur heavy casualties, as well. Both sides then dug in, creating networks of trenches.
- Over the next two months, the Allies would pour more reinforcements into these landing zones. The troops lived a hellish existence, perpetually short of water and supplies and fighting a fruitless series of battles with their Turkish opponents. At the tip of the peninsula, there were three major offensives, known as the First, Second, and Third battles of Krithia, which managed to slowly advance the British lines but at a great cost in lives.
- With British progress in the south stalled, efforts were made to expand the pocket of territory held by the ANZACS, with similar results. Still, the Allies persisted, sending more reinforcements to Gallipoli. The last major offensive came in August, when Hamilton decided to try one more landing at a site north of the ANZACS called Suvla Bay.

- In support of this, the ANZACS made several fruitless attacks to draw the Turks' attention away from the new landings. In one of these, the Australian Light Horse Brigade lost three-quarters of its men.
- About 25,000 men succeeded in coming ashore at Suvla Bay, which turned out to be mostly undefended, but after initially gaining some ground, this offensive also degenerated into a stalemate.
- This situation dragged on into the fall, when harsh winter weather replaced the previously intolerable heat. The Allies at last admitted defeat and began to organize an evacuation. Although they feared that the evacuation would result in thousands of casualties, it was carried off with hardly any losses.

### **Outcome of Gallipoli**

- The bloodshed from the Gallipoli campaign was appalling. An estimated 25,000 British, 10,000 French, 7,500 Australians,



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**Probably the person who benefited the most from the Gallipoli campaign was the commander who had taken prompt action to oppose the landings, Mustapha Kemal; he later became president of Turkey.**

and 2,500 New Zealanders were killed. Out of roughly 500,000 soldiers committed over the course of the campaign, the total Allied casualties amounted to nearly 250,000 men. Turkish records are more incomplete, but they likely suffered a similar number of casualties.

- Recriminations over the disaster resulted in several individuals losing their jobs. Hamilton was dismissed from his command just before the evacuation; the fiasco ended his military career. As the main architect of the campaign, Churchill also was the object of much opprobrium and was removed as head of the Admiralty.
- Considering the enormous scale of losses incurred for no military or strategic gain, the Gallipoli campaign must count as one of the greatest military blunders. The entire episode constitutes a litany of mistakes to avoid.
  - The expedition was flawed in its concept, was based on unwarranted assumptions, and was completely unrealistic in its expectations. The planning was inept and the allocation of resources poorly executed. Spending several months on a series of ineffectual naval attacks gave the Turks ample time to prepare their defenses, and the final naval assault was a complete disaster.
  - The land offensive was no better, crippled from the outset by a poor choice of commander in chief. The landings, with all of their confusion and missed opportunities, revealed a number of glaring weaknesses in the planning and organization of the operation. Poor command and control, unclear objectives, and mediocre officers all contributed to their lack of success.
  - Even at this stage, the Gallipoli campaign might have ultimately amounted to little more than a minor embarrassment, but the Allies' inability to admit their errors caused them to continue to pour vast quantities of men and resources into a project that they should have known was doomed to failure.

## Suggested Reading

Hart, *Gallipoli*.

Prior, *Gallipoli: The End of the Myth*.

## Questions to Consider

1. The campaign at Gallipoli was particularly rich in the variety of blunders committed by the Allies, including underestimation of the enemy, incorrect assumptions, poor planning, delays, inadequate equipment and intelligence, unclear orders, inept leadership, lack of initiative, and stubbornness. Which of these was most significant in explaining the failure of the expedition?
2. Although Gallipoli was an utter disaster from a military perspective, paradoxically, almost all the nations involved emerged from the campaign with strengthened senses of identity and national pride. How is this possible, and how can defeats sometimes enhance patriotism? (Think of comparative examples, such as the battles of Thermopylae or the Alamo.)

# World War II: Royal Navy Goes Down—1941–42

## Lecture 21

Britain's Royal Navy takes justifiable pride in its history, but its impressive record is not without blemishes. Two of the worst British naval disasters took place within a few months of each other during World War II. The first occurred in December of 1941 off the coast of Malaya. There, what was thought to be a technologically sophisticated battleship—the *Prince of Wales*—was easily sunk by Japanese bombers. Then, in July 1942 in the Barents Sea, Convoy PQ 17, a group of merchant ships, was abandoned by its navy escorts, and most were sunk. The cause of this fiasco was premature panic over a threat that, in reality, did not exist. This lecture explores these maritime misfortunes.

### Singapore and the Sinking of the *Prince of Wales*

- At the outset of World War II, the centerpiece of the British fleet was its battleships—giant, heavily armored vessels sporting massive cannons. A few voices had begun to question the supremacy of battleships, warning that these leviathans were vulnerable to attack from aircraft, but most within the Royal Navy still believed that the vessels could not be sunk by airplanes.
- In the Far East region, the linchpin of Britain's naval defenses was the city of Singapore, located at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. Just before the war, Britain had spent £60 million constructing and fortifying a naval base at Singapore, with defenses focused on repelling attacks from the sea.



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**At the outset of World War II, the Japanese were undergoing a rapid build-up of their army and navy and had developed a number of superior aircraft.**

- As war with Japan loomed, Winston Churchill, the prime minister of Britain, decided that a powerful squadron should be sent to Singapore. He optimistically believed that the presence of a few warships of the Royal Navy would be sufficient to deter the Japanese from aggressive behavior. Further, the Allies believed that the Japanese were incapable of producing high-technology weapons, although they had developed a number of aircraft that were far superior to their American and British counterparts.
- The newest member of the British battleship fleet was the *Prince of Wales*. The ship was 750 feet long, displaced nearly 45,000 tons, and was manned by a crew of more than 1,500 sailors.
  - The ship featured a number of innovations in armament and armor. The navy believed that the *Prince of Wales* represented the cutting edge of warship construction and would be more than capable of handling any threats—by sea or air—it might encounter.
  - On its Far East mission, the *Prince of Wales* was accompanied by one of Britain's older warships: the outdated but fast battlecruiser *Repulse*. The two ships arrived in Singapore on December 2, 1941, and were designated Force Z.
- On December 7, the Japanese launched their air attack on Pearl Harbor, and Japanese bombers decimated the U.S. Pacific fleet of battleships. Other Japanese forces began attacks in the Pacific, including bombing Singapore and landing troops just to the north, in Thailand.
- The commander of Force Z decided to sail north and oppose the Japanese landings. Although some British planes were potentially available to provide air cover for the ships, the admiral made no effort to arrange for this. The *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, along with a few small destroyers, left Singapore and began a fruitless attempt to intercept the Japanese invasion convoys.

- By midnight on December 8, it was clear that the British force had been spotted by Japanese search aircraft and submarines, and the admiral realized that they should head back to Singapore. Unfortunately, just then, a report arrived that Japanese troops were disembarking nearby on the coast. This report later turned out to be inaccurate, but the British commander could not resist the temptation to check it out.
- On arriving at the supposed landing site in the morning, the British were met with an empty beach. Even at this point, they could have turned back and perhaps escaped, but the admiral next chose to linger to investigate a tugboat that had been sighted pulling a couple of barges.
  - This poor decision shows the British admiral's disregard for the threat posed by Japanese aircraft—he knew that Force Z had been seen and would be attacked if it stayed in the area.
  - Compounding this error was the fact that Force Z was within range of a British airbase and could easily have summoned fighter planes to provide air cover against Japanese bombers, but the admiral sent no message.
- The first Japanese air assault came just before noon. A wave of planes dropping bombs was followed by a second with torpedoes. The complex antiaircraft guns on the *Prince of Wales* turned out to be extremely prone to jamming. Further, the unexpectedly fast-moving bombers threw off the gunners' aim.
- Two torpedoes struck the *Prince of Wales*, nearly disabling the ship. The resultant flooding caused the ship to take on an 11-degree list, which incapacitated its 5.25-inch gun turrets. Further attacks soon followed.
- In all, 85 Japanese bombers took part in the assault on Force Z. The *Prince of Wales* was struck by four more torpedoes, lost all power, came to a halt, and began to settle in the water, eventually going under. The *Repulse* managed to shoot down a few planes before it,



too, succumbed. Of the approximately 3,000 men aboard the two ships, 840 were killed, while the rest were picked up by destroyers.

### Convoy PQ 17

- In the summer of 1941, Russia had been invaded by Germany. Vital to Russia's efforts to survive the Nazi onslaught were weapons and other materials supplied by Britain and the United States. The main problem, however, was simply transporting the goods past the Germans to the Soviet Union.
- The primary way in which this was accomplished was by dispatching convoys of merchant ships from England that would dock at Russia's northern ports. Because these convoys had to travel along the long coast of Norway, which was occupied by the Germans, they were vulnerable to attack by German submarines, aircraft, and naval units. Accordingly, the convoys would swing far to the north above the Arctic Circle, skirt the ice pack, then cut back in toward their destination.
- This route was fraught with dangers, not only from the Germans but also from the harshness of the climate. The convoys, which often had inadequate naval escort, were beset from above by swarms of German bombers and from below by lurking submarines.
  - The sailors in these convoys were most frightened, however, by the prospect of an ambush by Germany's surface warships.
  - The destroyers, armed trawlers, and other small warships that accompanied the merchant ships were notionally equipped to combat submarines and planes, but they would be helpless if confronted with the thick armor and huge guns of a German battleship or heavy cruiser.
- Of all these threatening German vessels, the most powerful and most dreaded was the *Tirpitz*. The nightmare scenario for British convoy planners was that this ship would lunge out from Norway and slaughter an entire convoy, together with its escorts. Although the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* had exposed the vulnerability of

battleships to air power, the stormy and frequently foggy conditions of the Arctic Ocean meant that aircraft in this theater were often either grounded or ineffectual.

- The Arctic supply convoys began in September 1941. Outbound convoys were given the designation PQ, along with the number of the convoy. By June 1942, 16 of these had been run, with varying degrees of success. Despite the loss of some ships, most of the essential supplies got through to sustain the Soviet war effort. On June 27, 1942, Convoy PQ 17 set sail. It consisted of 35 merchant vessels escorted by 6 navy destroyers and about a dozen smaller warships.
- PQ 17 traversed more than two-thirds of its route without too much mishap and reached a point north of Bear Island. Thus far, three ships had been sunk by submarines and bombers, but on such a dangerous path, these were acceptable and expected losses.
- The Germans, however, were toying with the idea of trying to intercept PQ 17 with the *Tirpitz* and some other heavy warships. The *Tirpitz* and its escorts left their anchorage, but several destroyers ran aground, and the ships were soon recalled and went back into hiding.
- A British reconnaissance flight had passed over the *Tirpitz*'s anchorage and discovered that the ship had left its moorings. This news immediately touched off a great deal of concern among the British commanders at the Admiralty. The man in overall charge of naval affairs was First Sea Lord Dudley Pound, who feared that the *Tirpitz* might be heading toward the convoy. Pound precipitously decided that he had to act on the assumption that the ship was on its way to attack PQ 17. This was a panicky and unwarranted decision.
- Believing that the best chance the ships had for survival was to scatter, Pound sent a shocking message to PQ 17, ordering the convey to "disperse and proceed to Russian ports." Although no enemy was in sight, the escorting British warships had no choice

but to abandon the slow-moving and defenseless merchant ships to their fate, still 600 miles from their destination and in a stretch of water known to be infested with German U-boats.

- German U-boats and bombers pounced on the helpless merchant ships that had been presented to them by Pound's order. The valiant merchant crews attempted a number of desperate strategies to evade the Germans, but they were ruthlessly hunted down. In the end, 26 out of the 35 merchant ships were sunk. If the *Tirpitz* had actually attacked, the outcome could hardly have been worse. Along with the ships and crews, their vital cargos were also sent to the bottom of the ocean.

### Naval Disasters

- Both the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the disaster of Convoy PQ 17 resulted from bad decision making and misjudgment of opponents.
  - Although most navies were slow to appreciate the new danger posed by air power, the British grossly underestimated the competence of the Japanese, while severely overvaluing the abilities and intimidation effect of their own ships.
  - Once Force Z had set out, its commander persisted far too long in a poorly defined mission and showed terrible judgment in risking his ships for negligible goals, while stubbornly refusing to make use of available air cover.
- Conversely, with PQ 17, the British fatally overestimated the aggressiveness of the Germans and were excessively influenced by their fears of the *Tirpitz*. The obsession with this one ship warped their strategy and led to the decision to disperse the convoy unnecessarily. These debacles illustrate that even the best organizations can stumble badly, resulting in calamity.

## Suggested Reading

Middlebrook and Mahoney, *Battleship*.

Woodman, *Arctic Convoys, 1941–1945*.

## Questions to Consider

1. In one of the incidents discussed in this lecture, the British navy made the error of underestimating its opponent and, in the other, of overestimating the opponent. Both ended disastrously. Which do you think was the worse error and why?
2. Although Pearl Harbor is more famous, the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* was the more definitive illustration of the weakness of battleships relative to air power. Why are militaries so often slow to recognize the threats posed by new technologies?

# Dieppe Raid: Catastrophe on the Beach—1942

## Lecture 22

On August 19, 1942, Canadian and British troops staged an amphibious raid on the German-occupied French city of Dieppe. At least on the surface, the raid failed to accomplish any of its objectives: seizing control of Dieppe, demolishing German artillery batteries, capturing German landing craft, and destroying German planes. In the end, most of the attackers never even made it off the landing beaches, only one group of guns was demolished, no vessels were obtained, and the British suffered greater casualties than the Germans in the air battle. Indeed, the attack on Dieppe had one of the worst casualty rates of any major operation during World War II, with the Allies losing more than 4,000 men.

### Operation Jubilee

- In 1942, Germany had conquered most of Western Europe, and its armies were pushing deep into the Soviet Union. The British were under pressure from Stalin to attack Germany from the west to relieve the Russians. The British were not yet ready to open a second front by undertaking a major invasion of Western Europe, but they decided to stage a number of hit-and-run raids against targets in German-occupied areas, including Norway and France.
- The most ambitious of these schemes was to assault and briefly seize the French coastal town of Dieppe, located just across the English Channel. Dieppe itself was not of any strategic importance, but in addition to the symbolic value of striking against Nazi-held Europe, the raid might provide a useful test of the Allies' ability to mount a large-scale amphibious landing against a defended target.
- Responsibility for these raids fell to a group known as Combined Operations, which was headed by Lord Mountbatten. He lobbied hard to get his plan for an attack on Dieppe approved. At the time, more than 200,000 volunteer Canadian soldiers had arrived in England but had not seen any significant action. It was thus decided

that Canadians would make up the bulk of the invading force, along with some British commandos, 50 American Rangers, and a handful of free French troops.

- The raid was set for July, but bad weather caused it to be postponed until August. Its code name was to be Operation Jubilee. The operation's goals were ill defined, and the massive size of the raid was unusual. The immediate tactical objectives, which involved seizing the town and blowing up a few outposts, simply were not worth such a large-scale operation. The true purpose seems to have been to learn whether or not the Allies were capable of mounting such an operation and its symbolic political value as a blow struck at Nazi-occupied Europe.

### Subsidiary Landings

- To support the main attack on Dieppe, six subsidiary landings were planned against points on the surrounding coastline. Because most of these flank attacks were intended to destroy large gun emplacements threatening the primary invasion, they were timed to take place just before the main landing. To the east of Dieppe, these sites were designated Blue Beach, Yellow Beach I, and Yellow Beach II. To the west were Green Beach, Orange Beach I, and Orange Beach II.
- The carefully crafted plans first began to go awry when the boats transporting the units intended to land on the Yellow Beaches ran into a small German coastal convoy. A confused but fierce gun-battle erupted between the warships escorting the Allied troop transport vessels and their German counterparts. In the chaos, the troop ships became widely scattered.
  - In the aftermath of the battle, out of the original 23 troop carriers, 8 returned to England with damage, 8 were unsure whether to proceed, and 7 continued toward the beaches. At Yellow Beach I, 120 men struggled ashore and were met with heavy opposition. They were unable to progress more than a couple hundred yards, and eventually, all but one were killed or captured.

- At Yellow II, a single boat containing 20 men arrived at the beach. This tiny band disembarked and boldly headed inland. They sniped at the German battery that was their target but were hopelessly outnumbered and eventually returned to the beach, re-boarded their craft, and escaped.
- Just down the coast, roughly 600 men came ashore at the narrow Blue Beach, located below a steep cliff. Only a single ravine led up from the beach, and it was blocked by barbed wire and machine gun nests. The men were trapped on the beach by a substantial seawall topped by more barbed wire. With nowhere to go and completely exposed to multiple German machine gun positions, the men were mown down as soon as they stepped out of their boats. More than 90 percent of the regiment was wiped out.
- At the subsidiary beaches to the west of Dieppe, similar scenes unfolded. The troops who landed at Green Beach had been given an absurdly ambitious itinerary: to seize the beach, capture a radar station, destroy a German strongpoint, wipe out the Germans on the headland overlooking Dieppe, capture an airfield, destroy a gun battery, and attack the German divisional headquarters. The troops bravely attempted to fulfill these objectives but met with stiff opposition and suffered heavy casualties; they were eventually pushed back to the beach.
- The only definite success took place at the Orange Beaches, where two groups managed to reach one of their targets: a German gun emplacement. The commandos engaged the battery's guards in a spirited firefight, then lobbed a couple rounds from a 2-inch mortar at the German position. A lucky shot hit some stored ammunition, and the explosion knocked out the battery for the duration of the raid.

### **Main Attack at Dieppe**

- The main effort was directed at the beach in front of the town of Dieppe. Because this area was the focal point of all the German defenses, the landing amounted to a frontal attack on the most heavily defended location. The Allied troops would have to come

ashore on an exposed beach overlooked on three sides by higher ground that was full of German troops, machine guns, and cannons.

- For an attack on this site to have any chance of success, the optimal method would have entailed either destroying or capturing the gun emplacements on the cliffs. The earliest plan had called for paratroopers to knock out the German cannon batteries, but this idea was later vetoed.
  - Another good option would have been to suppress or obliterate the emplacements using large naval cannon, but the navy refused to contribute a warship, and the only naval gun support came from a handful of small destroyers.
  - Attacks from aircraft could have bombed the German positions before the soldiers came ashore, but there was concern that bombing might produce rubble in the streets of Dieppe that might impede the advance of the troops off the beach. Therefore, air attacks were limited to a few quick strafing runs.
- The British organizers planned to land a sizable contingent of Churchill tanks on the beach along with the soldiers. The tanks were supposed to accompany the first wave of infantry and provide crucial fire support during the initial moments of the landing. They would then constitute an armored spearhead that would punch through the German defenses and quickly lead the infantry into the town. The plan seemed good on paper, but the reality proved more difficult.
- To begin with, the leading tanks did not arrive on the beach until 15 minutes after the infantry had already gone ashore. Without the tanks, the unsupported infantry suffered heavy casualties, and by the time the tanks showed up, the attack had lost its momentum; the men were focused on seeking places to hide from the German gunners rather than pushing forward.
  - When the tanks finally landed, an additional serious problem arose: The tanks could not get traction on the large stones of the beach and, instead, dug straight down into the shingle, eventually immobilizing themselves in the stones.





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**At the time of Dieppe, Churchill tanks had not yet been deployed in battle; they were brand new and were designed with heavier armor than previous models.**

- About half the tanks quickly got stuck in the shingle or were knocked out by the fusillade of German shellfire. Ultimately, of the 29 tanks that made it ashore, 15 managed to cross the beach and reach the firmer ground of the broad esplanade just beyond it.
- These tanks roared forward, only to discover that every street leading into the town had been blocked with concrete barriers. In the original battle plan, these obstructions were supposed to have been blown up by sappers, but most of the sappers had either been killed or were in the boats that never got to the beach.
- The 15 tanks tried to use their cannon and machine guns to knock out enemy positions, but their guns were not powerful enough to destroy the well-fortified German emplacements. As they milled about in the open, the tanks were easy targets and, one by one, were disabled by German artillery.
- The main attack on the beach in front of Dieppe was a catastrophe. Far from quickly advancing into the town, the force was trapped on the beach, where they were steadily picked off by German gunners.

Offshore, the Allied commanders committed another error by electing to send in an additional wave of troops. Many of the new arrivals came ashore directly beneath one of the cliffs, where they were instantly decimated by fire from the Germans on the heights.

### **“Lessons” for D-Day**

- By midmorning, it was clear that the attacks had failed miserably; the only course of action was to try to extricate as many survivors as possible. However, there does not seem to have been a coherent contingency plan for evacuating the men if the attacks failed; thus, many groups were simply marooned on their beaches. By the afternoon, those soldiers still alive on the beaches were forced to surrender. Total Allied casualties exceeded 4,000.
- From conception to execution, the Dieppe raid was full of erroneous estimates, unclear objectives, poor planning, and sloppy execution. The only bright spot was the considerable valor displayed by the unfortunate men caught up in the debacle. Three Victoria Crosses were granted, along with a slew of lesser awards.
- It was retroactively claimed, particularly by Mountbatten and Churchill, that the hard lessons learned at Dieppe contributed to the superior planning that went into the D-Day invasion two years later. There is probably some truth to this. Certainly, Dieppe showed the need for better cooperation among air, naval, and ground units, as well as for intense air and naval bombardment prior to the landings.
- Nevertheless, many of these supposed “lessons” should have been fairly obvious, and there were numerous other amphibious landings, such as those in the Mediterranean, that gave the Allies experience with this type of attack. Even if the Dieppe raid was doomed from the outset, the scale of the disaster that occurred there was avoidable—and unforgivable.

## Suggested Reading

Neillands, *The Dieppe Raid*.

Zuehlke, *Tragedy at Dieppe*.

## Questions to Consider

1. The most commonly offered justification for the Dieppe raid is that it provided valuable lessons for D-Day. Which of these lessons do you think should have been obvious without undergoing the fiasco at Dieppe, and which do you think could have been learned only from experience?
2. The Dieppe raid suffered from numerous overly optimistic or erroneous assumptions. Which of these assumptions do you think was most destructive in its effects?

# Operation Market Garden: A Bridge Too Far—1944

## Lecture 23

Early on the afternoon of September 17, 1944, the inhabitants of central Holland witnessed an event that has never been equaled either before or since: From the open doorways of 1,000 transport planes, more than 20,000 heavily laden British and American paratroopers descended to earth. Meanwhile, nearly 500 gliders landed in the fields and disgorged 14,000 more soldiers and 2,000 vehicles. The men and aircraft that darkened the skies over Holland on that day in early autumn of 1944 were part of a bold Allied offensive designated Operation Market Garden; its ambitious goal was nothing less than achieving complete victory in Europe by the end of the year.

### Origins of the Operation

- The Allies had assumed that once their beachheads in Normandy were established after D-Day, the British and American armies would make steady progress, overrunning German opposition in France, then pushing into Germany itself. The Germans, however, put up unexpectedly stiff resistance, and the offensive bogged down.
- As summer gave way to fall, the British troops in the north, under the command of Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, broke through and drove toward Holland. Meanwhile, to the south, an American army, led by General George S. Patton, stabbed across central France and raced toward the German frontier. The Allies overconfidently believed that the Germans were now beaten, and the only remaining question was who would get the credit.
- In launching attacks, Montgomery was usually extremely cautious. Now, however, he came up with an atypically daring scheme that would enable his army to win the race.
  - The main barrier between his forces and Germany were the many rivers, including the Rhine, that flowed through Holland and emptied into the North Sea. The bridges spanning these

obstacles formed natural choke points, and whoever controlled these controlled the doorways that led into Germany.

- Montgomery's plan called for a colossal airborne assault that would deposit 40,000 troops by parachute and glider to seize a chain of seven of these vital bridges. The furthest of the targets was 64 miles behind enemy lines, meaning that each of the contingents of troops holding its designated bridge would be isolated deep within enemy territory.
- A powerful ground army spearheaded by tanks would then advance rapidly along a narrow front toward the first of the bridges. The airborne troops there would be relieved, and the ground army would cross the bridge and drive for the next one.
- This sequence would be repeated until the last bridge, which spanned the Rhine River at the town of Arnhem, was reached. Once across the Arnhem bridge, Montgomery would have his entry into Germany.
- The airborne landing component of this plan was code named Market, while the thrust of the XXX Corps, which was the ground army, was labeled Garden. Therefore, the combined plan was referred to as Operation Market Garden.
- The plan was bold but also fraught with potential dangers. Because of weight restrictions, the airborne troops would have to drop with a limited amount of equipment and supplies; thus, they would be lightly armed when they confronted the enemy and could easily be massacred by more heavily armed German troops. A central component of the plan, therefore, was speed. The timetable called for XXX Corps to arrive at the furthest airborne troops—the ones holding the bridge at Arnhem—within 48 hours.
- The task given to XXX Corps was complicated by the fact that their main route of advance was a single narrow road. All the Germans had to do to thwart the entire plan was cut this tenuous route or

even just delay XXX Corps with ambushes long enough for the airborne troops to be overrun.

- Perhaps the biggest potential flaw in the plan was that the failure of any one part would result in the failure of the entire operation. In addition, the big prize—the goal that really mattered—was the Arnhem bridge over the Rhine. Even if all the other bridges were taken, if the Arnhem bridge was not held or if XXX Corps couldn't reach it, then all the other successes would be in vain.

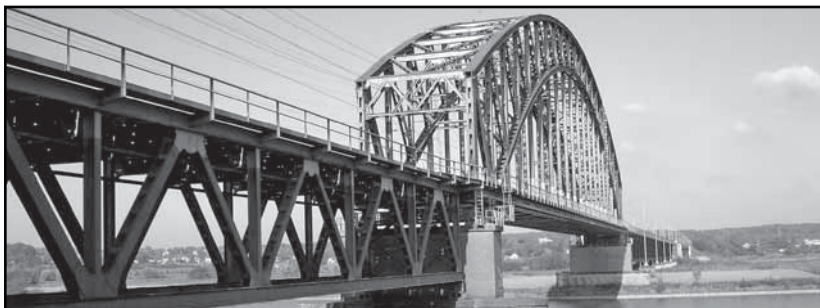
### **Advance to the Arnhem Bridge**

- On September 17, thousands of aircraft bearing the airborne forces lumbered into the skies and headed for their drop zones in Holland. There were three main landing sites: American troops of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division alighted near the town of Eindhoven, 13 miles behind enemy lines, and were charged with seizing three bridges there. The U.S. 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division was dropped 53 miles behind the front line near Nijmegen and also had three bridges to capture and hold. Finally, the British 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division was deposited near Arnhem, 64 miles into enemy territory, and was tasked with taking the vital Arnhem bridge.
- The Eindhoven and Nijmegen landings met with mixed success. Some of the bridges were quickly seized by the American paratroopers, but several were blown up by the Germans before they could be captured. Meanwhile, XXX Corps had begun its push along the road to open a corridor and reach the embattled airborne troops. Predictably, the going was tougher than expected. By the end of the first day, XXX Corps had advanced a total of only 7 miles.
- Despite these setbacks, the overall goals of Market Garden were still attainable. By dawn of September 19, XXX Corps passed Eindhoven, and the first group of airborne troops watched with relief as the British tanks rolled across the bridges they had fought for. The American soldiers at Nijmegen, although they suffered heavy losses, also managed to capture their bridge and, thereby, secure the next stepping-stone along the route to Arnhem. By

nightfall on September 20, XXX Corps was ready to undertake the final drive to Arnhem.

### **“A Bridge Too Far”**

- The British airborne troops assigned to Arnhem were at a disadvantage from the start of the operation because the Royal Air Force had insisted that the men be dropped 8 to 10 miles outside of the town. Once on the ground, the men experienced difficulties communicating among their scattered detachments or with higher command. And because of a shortage of available transport aircraft, a large percentage of the force could not arrive with the first wave. Finally, the paratroopers did not have detailed street maps of Arnhem.
- Shortly after landing, the British general in charge of the airborne troops attacking Arnhem effectively removed himself from control of the battle when he rather unwisely went forward to assess the situation, only to find himself cut off from his men. He became trapped in the home of a friendly Dutch family when a German armored vehicle happened to park outside. Although he eventually escaped, for 39 hours, the men at Arnhem were deprived of their commander’s leadership.
- Most of the groups assigned to seize the Arnhem bridge became bogged down in fighting German troops while trying to move from their drop zones toward the target.



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**The rebuilt bridge over the Rhine in Arnhem that was the focal point of such fierce fighting is now known as John Frost Bridge.**

- One battalion, however, under the command of Colonel John Frost, forced its way past the Germans and reached the north end of the Arnhem bridge around 9:00 p.m. on the first day. When they tried to advance across it, they encountered heavy opposition and drew back, establishing themselves in buildings surrounding the northern end of the bridge. With his battalion supplemented by stragglers from other groups, Frost ended up with about 750 men.
- No significant reinforcements would reach Frost, and over the next several days, the Germans repeatedly attacked his small pocket of men. They fought back tenaciously, even managing to defeat an attack by a squadron of German armored cars, half-tracks, and light tanks.
- After their initial shock, the Germans responded well to Market Garden, organizing their nearby troops into a series of ad hoc battle formations and launching counterattacks. Some German groups threatened to sever the narrow corridor held by XXX Corps at various points, while others clustered between Nijmegen and Arnhem to try to prevent XXX Corps from advancing further. Still others surrounded Frost and his men, as well as the rest of the British paratroopers outside of Arnhem, trying to wipe out these isolated pockets.
- Over the next several days, from September 20 to 24, battles raged at all these points. XXX Corps got to within just a few miles of linking up with the troops at Arnhem, but by then, German resistance was increasing, while the exhausted Allied troops were running low on ammunition and other critical supplies.
  - The airborne troops at the north end of the Arnhem bridge held on for three long days, with nearly all of them, including Frost himself, being wounded. After a heroic defense and with ammunition and water gone, they were at last overcome.
  - The main body of British troops who landed near Arnhem established a defensive position at the adjacent town of



Oosterbeek and continued fighting, but their casualties steadily mounted. An ill-advised attempt to reinforce them with Polish paratroopers only added to the number of trapped men.

- With XXX Corps stopped in its tracks and the Arnhem bridge still securely held by the Germans, Market Garden had failed. Reluctantly acknowledging this fact, the Allied command made the decision to evacuate the surviving airborne troops across the river; this was accomplished during the night of September 25. Of the approximately 10,000 men who had landed near Arnhem, only about 2,200 escaped. Total Allied casualties for Operation Market Garden were close to 17,000.

### **Summing Up Market Garden**

- With the failure of Market Garden, all hopes of ending the war by the end of 1944 died. The Germans, in fact, turned out to be far from beaten, and in December, unleashed their powerful counteroffensive in the Ardennes Forest—an operation that has come to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. It would not be until the spring of 1945 that Allied troops would finally advance through Holland, with Arnhem itself being liberated in mid-April.
- Operation Market Garden is routinely listed among the great military mishaps of World War II, and in terms of casualties sustained for results gained, it was undoubtedly a disaster. Additionally, as we have seen, the Allies made numerous errors in planning, organization, and execution.
- However, Market Garden may not deserve as much condemnation as many of the other military blunders we have examined. Without doubt, it failed, but it at least had a clear and worthy objective that might have exerted a great impact on the course of the war. Furthermore, despite all the errors of the Allies, it came fairly close to succeeding. While analyzing all the plan's flaws, we can still admire its boldness, and it is interesting to observe how thin the margin can sometimes be that separates a brilliant success from an appalling disaster.

## Suggested Reading

Kershaw, *It Never Snows in September*.

Ryan, *A Bridge Too Far*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Which half of the plan, the air assault (Market) or the ground attack (Garden), contributed more to the failure of the operation and why?
2. Does Market Garden deserve to be considered a true military blunder, or was it a decent plan that barely failed?

# The Great Blunders: Four Paths to Failure

## Lecture 24

The eminent contemporary military historian John Keegan has written, “All battles are, in some degree ... disasters.” In the sense that military conflicts inevitably involve death and destruction, this statement is certainly true, but despite their often terrible cost in lives and resources, many battles are still regarded as great triumphs. Obviously, the winning side in a conflict might be predisposed to view it in a positive light, while the reverse is true for the losers. Even when allowing for this difference in perspective, however, there are certain military events that are nearly universally excoriated as blunders. In this lecture, we’ll look at what sets these apart for special condemnation.

### Examining Military Blunders

- For a military defeat to qualify as a true blunder, it must be avoidable. In other words, someone had to make a decision or perform an action that dramatically altered the outcome for the worse. Moreover, that choice or deed had to be one that common sense, training, or circumstance strongly suggested was unwise. In this interpretation, losing a battle because one was outnumbered or outmatched or had suffered a random misfortune is not alone enough to qualify it as a blunder.
- Thus, genuine blunders also involve an element of blame. The easiest targets for such censure are individuals, usually commanders, but sometimes the agent of the mishap is more amorphous. At times, prevailing cultural expectations or prejudices of an institution or society can create an atmosphere that leads to poor choices or misguided actions by an entire group. In other words, blunders can result from underlying structural flaws that may have been decades in the making.
- Of course, in reality, the causes of military blunders are often more complex than just a single factor; indeed, most military

disasters are the consequence of multiple mistakes. Frequently, these errors compound or build on one another, forming a chain of miscalculations leading to catastrophe. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to try to identify key moments or decisions that did more than others to ensure tragedy.

### Failures of Planning

- We can identify four general categories of military mistakes: failures of planning, of leadership, of execution, and of adaptation. The first group, failures of planning, encompasses decisions or omissions that effectively doom one side even before a battle is joined.
- Beginning with the broadest perspective, such failures can occur at the strategic level, when the objectives for an entire operation are either unclear or poorly chosen.
  - Sometimes, even attempting a military operation is a poor decision because any benefits that might be gained through success are disproportionately outweighed by the potential losses that could be incurred by failure.
  - An ancient example of this is the Sicilian expedition that attacked Syracuse, in which Athens unwisely overreached by committing the majority of its forces in pursuit of an objective that was merely a sideshow to the main conflict with Sparta. When the expedition was destroyed, Athens lost both its empire and the larger war.
- Another common contributor to disaster that occurs at the planning stage is the failure to gather proper intelligence. Not adequately scouting out the Boer positions at Colenso, which directly contributed to the subsequent botched assaults, illustrates this point.
- A related flaw is deliberately ignoring information that contradicts what the planners of an operation want to believe. In the Victorian era, the horrific massacre during the retreat from Kabul had its origins in Lord Auckland's disregard of the reports and recommendations he received from agents in the field.

- One specific planning error that shows up in a surprising number of the cases is the failure to take into account the particular characteristics of the terrain on which an army will operate. At Courtrai, the wet, marshy field broke the momentum of the heavily armored French knights and made them vulnerable to the crude but effective weapons of the Flemish shopkeepers.

### **Failures of Leadership**

- A second broad category of error is failures of leadership, which often take the form of incompetence. All too often in warfare, a general is given a task for which he is wholly unfit. A prime example can be found in the story of the retreat from Kabul, in which the constant dithering of the infirm, indecisive, and generally inept General Elphinstone effectively sealed the fate of thousands of his soldiers.
- Sometimes, a normally competent leader is confronted by a situation that proves to be beyond his abilities. When the renowned Chinese general Cao Cao had to conduct a campaign on the water rather than on land, his usual competence failed him. When the previously solid Roman general Crassus was forced to deal with the highly mobile and deadly horse archers of Parthia, he was unable to rise to the task.
- Another widespread failure of leadership is overconfidence. Valens at Adrianople, Napoleon in Russia, and the British at Gallipoli are all memorable examples. In addition, overconfidence is often coupled with a corresponding lack of respect for one's opponent. Custer's arrogant belief that he could defeat any number of Native Americans and Chelmsford's disregard for the threat posed by the Zulus caused both men to lead their troops to destruction.

### **Failures of Execution**

- Failures of execution are most typically manifested as tactical errors on the battlefield. One example that we have seen multiple times is the unwise decision of a commander to divide his army, allowing it to be destroyed piecemeal. In other cases, a clever enemy can

produce the same effect. At the Battle of the Kalka River, the Mongols deliberately enticed the Russians into spreading out their forces, with the result that they were picked off one by one.

- A variant of this error occurs when control of the army itself is split among several generals, creating an unclear chain of command. If the generals are rivals or personally dislike one another, such a divided command becomes a recipe for disaster. The animosity between the leaders of the British army and navy contingents during the campaign to capture Cartagena produced a comedy of errors that, unfortunately, ended in tragedy for their men.
- Another type of battlefield error involves failures in communication. These might arise from orders that were unclear in the first place, as at the Battle of the Crater or Adwa, or they could be due to technological inadequacies, such as those that plagued the two Russian armies at the Battle of Tannenberg. Perhaps one of the most infamous examples of miscommunication leading to disaster is the charge of the Light Brigade.
- A final kind of failure of execution is the inability to recognize when to call off an unsuccessful operation. At Syracuse, Gallipoli, and Dieppe, the leaders sent in additional forces to an operation that had already gone irretrievably wrong. In each case, rather than accepting moderate losses and living to fight another day, they reinforced failure, with the result that their casualties were greatly magnified.

### Failures of Adaptation

- The fourth broad category of failure that we have witnessed is the failure to adequately adapt to change. Sometimes, this involves clinging to strategies or tactics that have become outmoded, often because of advances in technology.
  - At Culloden, the charge of the Highlanders against the cannons and massed ranks of British muskets was brave but fruitless.
  - An interesting twist on failures to adapt to new weapons is the Battle of Nagashino. There, both sides used the new technology

of firearms, but victory went to the one that had learned how to use it most effectively.

- Another frequent error made with new technology is the failure to appreciate how destructive it can be. The sinking of the *Prince of Wales* was the direct result of naval commanders failing to recognize the threat that aircraft posed to those previously dominant armored warships.

## **Lessons of the Past**

- Failures of planning, leadership, execution, and adaptation—we have seen ample evidence of each of these while tracing the history of military blunders across time and around the world. With the possible exception of failures to adapt to new technology, the underlying theme that runs throughout these categories is a fundamental failure to learn from the past. One final case study illustrates this point.
- The border zone between the Indian subcontinent and central Asia—a region roughly equivalent to modern Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan—has been invaded repeatedly over a span of more than 2,000 years. The area has been the target of some of history's greatest conquerors and empires, including Alexander the Great, the Persians, the Mauryans, the Huns, the Rashidun Arabs, the Mongols, the Mughals, the Victorian British Empire, the Cold War-era Soviet Union, and the United States.
- On the surface, these are wildly different armies, hailing from a diverse array of political entities and cultures, motivated by divergent goals, and representing a wide range of military technology. But despite all the apparent differences, the experiences of many of these invading armies were eerily similar: They struggled to control territory, were victimized by hit-and-run raids, were often forced to cede the countryside to the indigenous people, and were confounded in their efforts to establish a stable centralized government.



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**Invaders of Afghanistan represent nearly the entire historical range of military technology, from swords and spears, through early gunpowder weapons, to modern tanks, cruise missiles, and drones.**

- Such was the case with three of the more famous of these invasions: those of Alexander, the British, and the Soviets. Each of these armies was among the best of its day; however, each met with unexpected difficulties, underestimated the scale of obstacles to pacification and the determination of their foe, and was hampered by poorly chosen motivations for mounting the invasion.
- Two key factors that remained constant from the days of Alexander through the Soviet invasion played a primary role in the similar difficulties that these armies encountered in the region: the geography of Afghanistan, with its rocky, difficult-to-traverse hills and valleys, and the complex tribal structures of the local people.
- Even a cursory look at the experiences of the many invaders of Afghanistan, from Alexander to the present, reinforces the idea that we are simply not very good at learning from the past.
  - However, the fact that our record of learning from previous mistakes might not be exemplary does not mean that we should stop trying. The past is one of our best guides to the future, and it is essential to at least attempt to glean its lessons.



- In his account of the Romans' rise to domination over the Mediterranean, Livy wrote: "In history, you see examples of every sort of behavior clearly displayed before you, and from these you can choose for yourself and your country noble deeds to imitate, as well as shameful and harmful actions to avoid." This message remains vital and important today.

### Suggested Reading

Cohen and Gooch, *Military Misfortunes*.

Holt, *Into the Land of Bones*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Of the various categories of military failure (failures of planning, leadership, execution, and adaptation), which do you think is the most blameworthy? Which do you think has been the greatest cause of military disasters and why?
2. Why do you think humans have a tendency repeat the same mistakes? Why are we not better at learning from the mistakes of the past?

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Hess, Earl. *Into the Crater: The Mine Attack at Petersburg*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2010. Solid, up-to-date narrative of the Battle of the Crater.

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